

**What's the Utility of the Case-Study Method for Social Science
Research?: A Response to Critiques from the
Quantitative/Statistical Perspective**

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Paper for delivery at the 2005 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science
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ABSTRACT

Although the case-study method is still widely-used in political science, the discipline has grown increasingly suspicious of its usefulness instead favoring “large-n”, quantitative research. In this paper, I argue that the discipline’s near “rejection” of the case-study method is based on a parochial and restrictive view of the social sciences. Critiques of the case-study method are usually predicated on the assumption that the primary task of social science research is theory-testing (hypothesis-testing). In contrast, I demonstrate the utility of the case-study method for theory-building and theory-elaboration (or theory-reconstruction). In this paper, I distinguish the case-study method from ethnography, “grounded theory,” and “doing history.” I also answer the critics’ two main criticisms of the case-study method- 1) the lack of “internal validity” and 2) the lack of “external validity”. The first criticism is only valid if the explicit purpose of analysis is the formal testing of causal relationships or hypotheses. I argue that the “internal validity” of the case-study method is largely predicated on the plausibility of analysis, the logical nature of the nexus between the dependent and independent variables, and the explanatory utility of the findings. These can be judged through the “quasi-judicial” method and collegial exchange. The second main criticism of the case-study method- the lack of “external validity”- is only valid if the explicit purpose of the research is enumerative extrapolation from a statistical sample to a parent universe. I argue that another purpose of social inquiry is analytical extrapolation by which causal processes occurring within one case are used to explain a particular social outcome, and also used to reevaluate theories explaining the general phenomenon in question. In conclusion, I argue that the case-study method is an important part of social science research. It contributes significantly to both our understanding of the world and also adds to social science theory.

This paper represents an initial foray into the case-study method and is thus a “work-in-progress.” Comments and suggestions are most welcome. Although the case-study method is still widely-used in political science especially in book-length monographs, the discipline has grown increasingly suspicious of its usefulness instead favoring so-called “large-n,” quantitative research.¹ The demise of the case-study method in political science is, in part, evident by the fact that the percentage of articles using the case-study method published in the *American Political Science Review*, the premier journal in the discipline, plunged from 70 percent to under 10 percent between 1965 and 1975.² In contrast, those using statistical methods had an almost two-fold increase during the same period. This paper bucks the current methodological trend in the field of political science and, instead, argues that the discipline’s near “rejection” of the case-study method is largely unwarranted. This rejection is based largely on a parochial and restrictive view of the purpose of social science research.

The central argument set-forth in this paper is that critiques of the case-study method, including those traditionally cited in the methodological literature in political science,³ are usually predicated on the underlying assumption that the only or primary legitimate task of social science research is *theory-testing* (hypothesis-testing). This appears to be the dominant methodological conviction in the field today. This

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This has especially been the case after the publishing of Gary King, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

² Andrew Bennett, Aharon Barth, and Ken Rutherford, “Do We Preach What We Practice? A Survey of Methods in Political Science Journals and Curricula,” *P.S.: Political Science and Politics*, 36:3 (July 2003), 375.

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These include Arend Lijphart, “Comparative Politics and the Comparative Method,” *American Political Science Review*, 65:3 (September 1971), 682-693; and Harry Eckstein, “Case Study and Theory in Political Science,” in Fred I. Greenstein and Nelson W. Polsby (eds.), *Handbook of Political Science: Strategies of Inquiry* (vol. 7) (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1975), 79-137.

perspective, I contend, insufficiently considers other important goals for social science research including *theory-building* and especially *theory-elaboration* (or *theory-reconstruction*) which are also central to the endeavor of social science. The view that *theory-testing* is the only legitimate (or primary) task of social science research is an obstacle to a better understanding of the myriad of important social and political phenomenon that affect the world in which we live.

This is not to argue that *hypothesis-testing*, either through qualitative or quantitative means, is not a useful or important exercise. In fact, it is both important and useful. Rather, a central point of this paper is that an ideological or canonical conviction to any particular method or approach should not determine the choice of research methods used for an academic study. Each method in the social sciences has its own comparative strengths and weaknesses, and the choice of methods should be based on the analytical task at hand and not on any parochial methodological bias. The plurality of “tools” and “methods” available for a social scientist leads to a more accurate, rich, and nuanced understanding of politics and other social phenomenon. Similarly, I argue that research agendas should be problem-driven and not methodology-driven.

Before preceding further, it is important to clarify the definitions of a few select terms that will be repeatedly used throughout this paper. The term “theory” is broadly used to refer to “[s]ystematically organized knowledge applicable in a wide variety of circumstances, esp. as a system of assumptions, principles, and rules of procedure devised to analyze, predict, or otherwise explain the nature or behavior of specified phenomena.”⁴ Thus, a theory can be used to either describe or explain. The term “hypothesis” is much more restrictive and is defined as “[a] tentative explanation that

⁴ *The American Heritage Dictionary* (1993), s.v. “theory.”

accounts for a set of facts and can be tested by further investigation.”⁵ Thus, a “hypothesis” is much narrower than a “theory,” and is used almost exclusively for purposes of explanation (as opposed to description). A “hypothesis,” furthermore, sets forth a possible relationship(s) between variables that can be empirically tested. The minimal definition of “cause(s)” refers to “events or conditions that raise the probability of some outcome occurring,”⁶ and a more stringent definition is “the [probable] producer of an effect, result, or consequence.”⁷ The definition of “cause(s)” used in the paper lies somewhere in between the minimalist and more stringent definitions, but leans more toward the latter for a variety of epistemological reasons. The term “causal” refers to “[o]f, involving, or being a cause”⁸ and “causation” is “[t]he act or process of causing.”⁹ Other terms used regularly in this paper should be self-explanatory except when a specific specialized definition is offered. Now to substantive portion of the paper!

WHAT IS THE CASE-STUDY METHOD, ITS GENERAL PURPOSE, AND HOW IT IS APPLIED

Scholars have defined the “case-study” method in a variety of different, but usually interrelated, ways. Robert Yin defines a case-study as being “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident.”¹⁰ John Gerring adds his own definition by writing, “[A] case study is best defined as an in-depth

⁵ Ibid., s.v. “hypothesis.”

⁶ John Gerring, “Causation: A Unified Framework for the Social Sciences,” paper presented at the 2003 American Political Science Association meeting, 7.

⁷ *The American Heritage Dictionary* (1993), s.v. “cause.”

⁸ Ibid., s.v. “causal.”

⁹ Ibid., s.v. “causation.”

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Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1984), 23.

study of a single-unit (a relatively bounded phenomenon) where the scholar's aim is to elucidate features of a larger class of similar phenomenon."¹¹ According to Alexander George and Andrew Bennett, the case-study method involves a "detailed examination of an aspect of a historical episode to develop or test historical explanations that may be generalizable to other events."¹² Peter Evans, for his part, largely concurs with the assessment of others and argues that case-studies take an "eclectic messy center" approach to social science methodology. He explains by writing

It (the case-study method) is work that draws on general theories whenever it can but also cares deeply about the particular historical outcomes. It sees particular cases as the building blocks for general theories and theories as lenses to identify what is interesting and significant about particular cases. Neither theories nor cases are sacrosanct. Cases are always too complicated to vindicate a single theory...At the same time, a compelling interpretation of a particular case is only interesting if it points to ways of understanding other cases as well.¹³

While these four definitions or descriptions of the case-study method differ on some points, they share one important proposition in common. This is that the purpose of case-study research is to both learn *about* a specific social situation and also to learn *from* it. Both purposes are central for case-studies.

In a wider methodological perspective, it is generally accepted that the case-study method lies between the "hard" rational-choice approach that stresses statistical or game-theoretic testing of deductive hypotheses, and post-modernist approaches that focus strictly on interpretation and meaning. Case-studies also lie between "hard" rational-

¹¹ John Gerring, "What Is a Case Study and What is it Good For?", *American Political Science Review*, 98:2 (May 2004), 341.

¹² Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 5.

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Peter Evans, "The Role of Theory in Comparative Politics: A Symposium," *World Politics*, 48:1 (October 1995), 4.

choice and statistical approaches that pay little or no attention to the complexity of the spatial environment, and cultural approaches that rely purely on the inductive method and stress the uniqueness of the particular temporal and spatial environment.¹⁴ Thus, case-studies generally avoid both the “positivist reduction” that reduces social sciences to the natural sciences and discounts the hermeneutic dimension of research, and the “humanist reduction” that suppresses the scientific dimension of trying to find empirically-verifiable general laws.¹⁵ Instead, case-studies emphasize both understanding and explanation of both the specific and general phenomenon under investigation. The hermeneutic dimension involved in examining (or interpreting) the specific case provides the empirical basis for the scientific dimension and extrapolating lessons from the specific case to the wider theoretical phenomenon in question. Thus, the hermeneutic component is necessary for analyzing the particular case, but I argue that the primary reason for engaging in case-studies is to contribute to general scientific knowledge about how the world works. Thus, the ultimate goal of case-studies is to contribute to social science theory.

Case-studies usually take the form of historical narratives. Robert Bates, Avner Greif, Margaret Levi, Jean-Laurent Rosenthal, and Barry Weingast argue that the immediate purpose of these historical narratives- termed “analytic narratives”- is “to account for outcomes by identifying and exploring the mechanisms that generate them.”¹⁶ In particular, case-studies “seek to cut deeply into the specifics of a time and place, and to

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Atul Kohli, “The Role of Theory in Comparative Politics: A Symposium,” *World Politics*, 48:1 (October 1995), 47-49.

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Michael Burawoy (et. al.), *Ethnography Unbound: Power and Resistance in the Modern Metropolis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 2-3.

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Robert H. Bates, Avner Greif, Margaret Levi, Jean-Laurent Rosenthal, Barry W. Weingast, *Analytic Narratives* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 12.

locate and trace the processes that generate the outcome of interest.”¹⁷ This usually involves the technique of “process-tracing.” Alexander George and Timothy McKeown explain the “process-tracing” technique by writing

This procedure is intended to investigate and explain the decision process by which various initial conditions are translated into outcomes...The process-tracing approach attempts to uncover what stimuli the actors attend to; the decision process that makes use of these stimuli to arrive at decisions; the actual behavior that then occurs; the effect of various institutional arrangements [and other variables] on attention, processing, and behavior.¹⁸

These narratives are characterized as being “analytic” because they extract “explicit and formal lines of reasoning which facilitate both exposition and explanation.”¹⁹ As explained earlier, case-studies focus on mechanisms that translate historical forces into specific political outcomes. But, this immediate purpose of case-studies is extended further for another larger purpose. As Bates (et. al.) explain, “[b]y isolating and unpacking such mechanisms, analytic narratives thus [also] contribute to structural accounts.”²⁰ These “structural accounts” essentially mean “theories” or “models.” George and McKeown concur by writing that the goal of “process-tracing” is to both “reconstruct actors’ definitions of the situation and [also] attempt to develop a theory of action.”²¹ Thus, the “analytic” narratives found in case-studies help to explain political outcomes in the specific case but also attempt to contribute to wider social science theory.

¹⁷

Ibid.

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Alexander L. George and Timothy J. McKeown, “Case Studies and Theories of Organizational Decision Making,” in Robert F. Coulam and Richard A. Smith, *Advances in Information Processing in Organizations*, vol. 2, (Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, 1985), 35.

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Bates (et. al.), *Analytic Narratives*, 10.

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Ibid., 13.

²¹ George and McKeown, “Case Studies and Theories,” 35.

*THE ROLE OF THEORY IN THE CASE STUDY METHOD, AND ITS
DIFFERENCE FROM ETHNOGRAPY, “GROUNDED THEORY,” AND “DOING
HISTORY”*

The role of “theory” in the case-study method is a rather peculiar but important one. Theory is initially used as a sensitizing device at the outset of analysis to help focus analytical attention on certain important aspects of the case, and it subsequently helps identify and interpret causal processes during the actual empirical analysis. In essence, theory focuses and structures the study’s empirical analysis by helping to identify and interpret the relevant causal processes between the general independent and dependent variable(s). This cannot be done without an initial “guiding theory” because “causation” in the social sciences is, in reality, a complex and conjunctural phenomenon in which numerous variables combine at a given point in time to produce the result in question. Considering the nature of “causation,” an initial “guiding theory” or conceptual framework is necessary to determine where the study will cut this complex “chain of causality,” and identify what “part” of the “full picture” the study will analyze and present.²² No study can analyze all of the possible relevant variables and give the “full picture,” and thus a “guiding theory” is necessary on a practical basis as well to make the study more manageable. Furthermore, as James Bill and Robert Hardgrave argue, a guiding “middle-range” theory also makes the study theoretically-relevant by identifying the specific body of theory to which the study will eventually try to contribute.²³ A “case-study” can, in reality, be a “case” of a variety of possible theoretical categories and

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All scholarly studies need to do this. For a quick explanation and substantive example see Atul Kohli, *The State and Poverty in India: The Politics of Reform* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 2 and 12-14.

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James A. Bill and Robert L. Hardgrave, Jr., *Comparative Politics: The Quest for Theory* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1981), 30-33.

phenomenon. Thus, it can contribute to different bodies of theoretical literature depending on how the case-study is framed.

Theory is also important at the end of case-study analysis. The “analytic narratives” which form the heart of case-studies usually start with “‘thin’ forms of reasoning” (i.e. a guiding theory or conceptual framework), then move to “thick description (e.g. in-depth historical narrative), and finally to back to elaborating on the “‘thin’ forms of reasoning” by reassessing the guiding theory or conceptual framework in light of the causal mechanisms identified in the empirical analysis. The product of case-studies are “tendency statements” but usually not “universal generalizations” or “quantifiable probabilistic generalizations.”²⁴ The explanations or “tendency statements” emanating from case-study analysis usually have “instructive transferability” to other cases within the same category of phenomenon. The results or findings of a case-study, in essence, help identify both the strengths and deficiencies of the initial “guiding theory” in terms of the theory’s descriptive accuracy, predictive value, or general applicability. This, in turn, provides the basis for suggesting how the theory should be *reformulated* to improve its descriptive accuracy or predictive value based on the fit (or lack of fit) between the study’s findings and initial “guiding theory.” The culmination of case-studies about a particular political or social phenomenon combine to provide a much more rich and accurate description and explanation of the phenomenon in question, and thus also contribute to *theory-testing*, *theory-reconstruction*, and *theory-building* in the social sciences.

For these reasons, the case-study method is accurately described as being a dynamic analytical approach in which there is a constant movement back and forth

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Ibid.

between data and theory. In comparison, the pure “scientific method” is much more straightforward and static in the sense that theory (or hypotheses) are tested in a systematic and controlled deductive manner. It is for this reason, that Yin states that “the boundaries between phenomenon and context is not clearly evident” in case studies²⁵ and Evans writes that “[n]either theories nor cases are sacrosanct.”²⁶ This somewhat unique role of theory in the case-study method contributes to both its many strengths and weaknesses.²⁷

It must be noted that the case-study method differs significantly from ethnographic research, “grounded theory,” and “doing history” in terms of each method’s use (or comparative non-use) of theory and their eventual analytic (or methodological) goals. Ethnographic evaluations are based primarily on the assumption that there are multiple realities in the world that are socially-constructed.²⁸ For this reason, an ethnographer does not consciously seek to emulate the paradigm of empirical science which assumes the existence of an identifiable and objective reality. Ethnographers generally do not begin with strong theoretical formulations but rather attempt to directly experience the phenomenon under study and provide a “thick description” of it. This often entails the researcher’s immersion into the culture or group of interest. Unlike the case-study method, which seeks to *elaborate* on or *reconstruct* theory, the purpose of ethnographic research is the hermeneutic goal of gaining a sympathetic *understanding* of the world view held by the culture or group under study. Thus, there is comparatively little attempt in ethnographic research to generalize beyond the particular case under

²⁵ Yin, *Case Study Research*, 23.

²⁶ Evans, “The Role of Theory,” 4.

²⁷ For a discussion of these trade-offs, see George and Bennett, *Case Studies*, 19-34.

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Robert K. Yin, “The Case Study Method as a Tool for Doing Evaluation,” *Current Sociology*, 40:1 (Spring 1992), 124-25.

examination.²⁹ In contrast, theoretical extrapolation is the ultimate goal of case-study research.

The case-study method also differs significantly from the “grounded theory” approach.³⁰ The primary goal of the “grounded theory” approach, which was originally codified by medical sociologists for training clinical and medical researchers, is *theory-building*. This approach involves a purely inductive research process by which data is systematically accumulated “from the ground up,” and conclusions are subsequently extrapolated from examining and analyzing this inductively-accumulated data. In essence, the purpose of “grounded theory” is to produce sociological laws and generalizations through systematic research and comparison from the ground up to the macro level. This initially appears to resemble the case-study method, but there are two important differences. First, the “grounded theory” approach results in the systematic accumulation of quantitative data on clearly-defined variables whereas case-studies (especially those which are historical in nature) usually focus on the interplay between variables whose “values” are described in qualitative (as opposed to quantitative) terms. Secondly, the premature use of theory or prior conceptual categorization is generally discouraged in the “grounded-theory” approach unlike in the case-study method in which theory is used at the outset of analysis and during it as a “sensitizing device” to structure the analysis and flush-out causal relationships between the preconceived independent and dependent variables. The goal of the “grounded theory” approach is *theory-building* through the accumulation of data whereas case-studies lead to immediate attempts of

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Burawoy (et. al.), *Ethnography Unbound*, 273.

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This approach comes from medical sociologists Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (New York: Aldine Publications, 1967).

theory-reformulation or *elaboration* since theory plays a central part in this method from the outset.

The case-study method is also different from “doing history.” Historians generally build a detailed narrative from a multiplicity of sources to describe a particular historical period or phenomenon, and try to let the “facts speak for themselves.”³¹ For this reason, historians have little use for theory or the theoretical enterprise. Thus, historians do not explicitly use a “guiding theory” at the beginning of their study to structure subsequent analysis, and nor do they usually attempt to *build* or *reformulate* theory at the study’s conclusion. The former is avoided in order prevent analytical “bias” or prematurely restricting the historical analysis, and the latter is not considered to be a worthwhile or achievable goal since each historical episode is usually characterized as being unique or idiosyncratic. Thus, historians generally view the entire endeavor of *theory-building* or, by extension, *theory-reformulation* as being of questionable value. In contrast, theory is an integral part of the case-study method both at the outset and conclusion of analysis. As John Walton writes, case-studies come “wrapped in theories” and they subsequently contribute to the *building* or *reformulation* of social science theory.³²

*THE QUANTITATIVE/STATISTICAL CRITIQUE OF THE CASE-STUDY METHOD:
ISSUES OF “INTERNAL VALIDITY” AND “EXTERNAL VALIDITY”*

Scholars working in quantitative/statistical tradition level two broad criticisms against the case-study method- 1) its lack of “internal validity” and 2) its lack of “external validity.” The first criticism is based on the fact that case-studies supposedly

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Stephen Van Evera, *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 93.

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John Walton, “Making the Theoretical Case,” in Charles C. Ragin and Howard S. Becker (eds.), *What is a Case?: Exploring the Foundations of Social Inquiry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

deal with more variables than the number of observations on these variables.³³ Critiques from the quantitative/statistical perspective argue that rival explanations (hypotheses) cannot be ruled-out in case-studies because of the lack of experimental or statistical control. The second criticism- lack of “external validity”- is based on the fact that case-studies deal with an “N=1” or, in lay terms, with only a single case or sample. As a result, critics contend that it is not possible to reliably generalize the findings of a case-study to the wider population at large. I agree that these criticisms are partially correct, but also agree that they are quite problematic and thus need to be significantly qualified considering the somewhat different analytic goals of each method.

The first criticism- the lack of “internal validity”- is valid only if the explicit purpose of one’s analysis is the formal *testing* of causal relationships or hypotheses. As stated earlier, formal *hypothesis-testing* is not the only valid scholarly enterprise in the social sciences. Other legitimate endeavors also include *theory-building* and *theory-elaboration (theory-reconstruction)*. While it is true that case-studies cannot explicitly rule-out rival hypotheses due to their inherent paucity of “control” in comparison to the experimental and statistical methods, this does not mean that all causal arguments emanating from case-studies are equally valid. The “internal validity” of case-study findings is actually predicated on the plausibility of the analysis, the logical nature of the nexus between the dependent and independent variables, and the explanatory utility of the findings.³⁴ To explain, any explanation of the causal processes at work in the case-study must both explain the final outcome and also be able to account for the stream of behavior or events presented in the “analytic narrative.” Thus, the case serves as its own

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King, Keohane, and Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry*, 52; and Lijphart, “Comparative Politics,” 685.

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J. Clyde Mitchell, “Case and Situation Analysis,” *The Sociological Review*, 31:2 (May 1983), 1999.

“control” because changes in the stream of behavior or events in the narrative, as George and McKeown contend, can be linked to changes in the theoretically-relevant variables identified in the study’s “guiding theory” or conceptual framework.³⁵ As explained earlier, a “guiding theory” or conceptual framework is a necessary part of a case-study. While the relationship between the independent and dependent variable(s) in the study may seem dynamic, the element of temporality (or sequence) found in historically-oriented narratives helps the scholar determine the direction (and nature) of causality with increased confidence. As Tim Buthe explains, “[T]he incorporation of a sequential element enables us to do this (explain dynamic change) without running the risk of the circular reasoning often associated with endogenizing the independent variables.”³⁶

The “internal validity” of a case-study’s findings cannot be concisely measured with quantitative values, but two broad methods exist to help gauge it. These methods are the “quasi-judicial method” and collegial review. Regarding the former, statistical significance testing is not the only way in which individuals and societies arrive at judgments about the truthfulness of various social claims. As McKeown explains, judges and juries come to reasonable conclusions and make judgements everyday about causation and intent based on only a single case.³⁷ These decisions are usually made in one of two ways- either with uncontroversial evidence (such as an undoctored videotape showing a criminal act in progress) or, more often, by a conglomeration of “circumstantial evidence.”³⁸ This “circumstantial” evidence often consists of piecing

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George and McKeown, “Case Studies and Theories,” 36.

³⁶ Tim Buthe, “Taking Temporality Seriously: Modeling History and the Use of Narratives as Evidence,” *American Political Science Association*, 96:3 (September 2002), 486.

³⁷

Timothy J. McKeown, “Case Studies and the Statistical Worldview: Review of King, Keohane, and Verba’s *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research*,” *International Organization*, 53:1 (Winter 1999), 167.

³⁸

Ibid., 170.

together the actions of various actors in which the timing of events and assessing who possessed what information are central features. All of the actors and evidence are then brought together to identify which suspect(s) are most likely guilty. This is done by explaining “how the observations fit together into a consistent and accurate causal explanation of events.”³⁹ Many alternative theories and “suspects” are discarded in the process of investigation when it is determined that they could not have caused the action or event in question.

Dennis Bromley helps codify the “quasi-judicial” method by setting forth eight formal steps for applying this method to clinical or social science research.⁴⁰ These are the following: 1) the initial problems and issues of the case must be clearly stated, 2) background information should be collected to provide a context in which to understand the problems and issues of the case, 3) existing or *prima facie* explanations of the case must be evaluated to determine whether they fit the evidence and to discern how they are lacking, 4) a new explanation should be set forth correcting the problems identified in the previously existing explanations, 5) the sources of evidence and the evidence itself used in the new explanation must be evaluated or “cross-examined,” 6) the internal coherence and logic of the new explanation including its compatibility with the evidence should be critically examined, 7) the new explanation’s conclusions regarding the case must be presented, and 8) the new explanation’s implications for comparable cases must be discussed.⁴¹

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Ibid., 171.

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Dennis B. Bromley, *The Case-Study Method in Psychology and Related Disciplines* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1986), 25-26. D.B. Bromley actually presents ten procedural steps for the “quasi-judicial” method which I have integrated into eight, in my opinion more coherent, steps.

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Ibid.

“Collegial review” is the other broad method of determining the “internal validity” case-study results. Much like the “quasi-judicial” method, “collegial review” relies on assessing and weighing the evidence (often “circumstantial”) provided in a case-study for its causal arguments.⁴² The researcher can help facilitate “collegial review” by explicitly stating the study’s “guiding theory,” discussing its strengths and limitations, and allowing others to judge for themselves the validity of the analysis. Presenting the study’s “guiding theory” is important because, as Vaughn explains, “By acknowledging our theoretical tools (i.e. our biases) as best we can at the outset, we can better guard against the tendency for our worldview to affect our interpretation of information in unacknowledged ways.”⁴³ This also allows reviewers to point to other possible explanations (or “rival hypotheses”) that may have been ignored because of the limited focus of the study’s initial “guiding theory.” Reviewers can also look for flaws in the internal logic of the causal argument or identify alternative sources of data (primary, secondary, or tertiary) which, if used, may have resulted in slightly altered historical narrative being constructed and differing causal mechanisms and processes being identified.⁴⁴ As Runyan explains, “Any explanatory conjecture can be made, but not all of them stand up under rigorous cross-examination.”⁴⁵ Both the “quasi-judicial” method and the method of “collegial review,” as explained earlier, are widely used in society and

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For a discussion see McKeown, “Case Studies and the Statistical Worldview,” 167-68 and 170.

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Diane Vaughan, “Theory Elaboration: The Heuristics of Case Analysis,” in Charles C. Ragin and Howard S. Becker (eds.), *What is a Case?: Exploring the Foundations of Social Inquiry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 196.

⁴⁴ There is a relatively new literature emerging in political science regarding how to assess rival “historical narratives.” For example, see Jonathan B. Isacoff, “Writing the Arab-Israeli Conflict: Historical Bias and the Use of History in Political Science,” *Perspectives of Politics*, 3:1 (March 2005), 71-88.

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William McKinley Runyan, “In Defense of the Case Study Method,” *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 52:3 (July 1982), 445.

also in our daily lives for the purposes of evaluation and decision-making. They are viable, and critical, ways for assessing “internal validity.”

The second main criticism of the case-study method leveled by the quantitative/statistical perspective involves its alleged lack of “external validity” or generalizability. This criticism is only valid if the explicit purpose of research is enumerative extrapolation from a statistical sample to the parent universe. This goal requires having a representative (or random and sufficiently-large) sample to find statistically significant correlations between variables. But, the purpose of social science research is not always statistical inference as sometimes implied by the quantitative/statistical approach. Instead, another purpose of social inquiry is to discern and describe causal processes that occur within a particular geographical and historical setting in order to explain a particular social outcome. As Bennett argues, “[Q]ualitative researchers are often as interested in the ‘causes of effects,’ and the contexts in which these causes do and do not operate, as they are in the ‘effects of causes’ across broad populations.”⁴⁶ For this purpose, the intensive case-study method is better suited than the extensive statistical method.

Yet, since the particular case is usually a part of a larger empirical category, the issues presented in the case-study are often similar to those treated in previous studies of the general phenomenon in question. Thus, extrapolation or generalization should and, indeed, can be achieved by showing that your case substantiates or, preferably, expands earlier understandings of the general phenomenon under examination. A good case-study, as Mitchell explains, does not necessarily make a “typical” case but rather makes a “telling” one.⁴⁷ A case-study may either make previously obscure theoretical

⁴⁶ Andrew Bennett, “The Fallacy of Fallacies,” *Qualitative Methods: Newsletter of the American Political Science Association Organized Section on Qualitative Methods*, 3:1 (Spring 2005), 6.

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relationships between variables more clear thus helping to *reconstruct* existing theory, or it may simply validate the claims made by existing theory thus increasing our confidence in the theory's accuracy and utility. As Bennett writes, "[T]he goal of 'testing' theories in case studies is as much to specify the conditions under which they apply and identify or verify the processes through which the outcome arose as it is to reach assessments on the 'general' validity of theories for broad populations."⁴⁸ George and McKeown concur with this assessment but take it even further by writing, "Testing a model against the same data that inspired it at least supplies a reasonably precise idea of how well the model really fits that data set. If the fit is good, one can then proceed to test the model in other settings. If the fit is not good, the process of model revision... can lead to an improved fit."⁴⁹ In other words, the purpose of social science research may be analytical induction where the goal is *reconstruction* of or *elaboration* on existing theory, and not necessary enumerative induction as often implied by the quantitative/statistical perspective.

In an odd sort of way, the "external validity" of a case-study is largely based on the "internal validity" of the analysis. According to Bates (et. al.), five different questions can be used to evaluate the interpretation of an "analytic narrative" and its importance once it is made explicit or recast as some type of model. These are the following: 1) Does its assumptions correspond to what is known?, 2) Does its conclusions follow from its premises?, 3) Does its implications find support in the data?, 4) How well does it stand up by comparison with other explanations?, and 5) How

Clyde J. Mitchell, "Case Studies," in R.F. Ellen (ed.) *Ethnographic Research: A Guide to General Conduct* (Orlando, FL: Academic Press, 1984), 237-41 as cited in McKeown, "Case Studies and the Statistical Worldview," 174.

⁴⁸ Bennett, "The Fallacy," 6.

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George and McKeown, "Case Studies and Theories," 40.

general is the explanation and how does it apply to other analogous cases?⁵⁰ The method for evaluating or answering these questions is also the “quasi-judicial” method and/or open “collegial review.”

“Instructive transferability” or generalizability from a case-study to the wider realm of theory is generally considered to be a four-step process. First, the case is conceived of by identifying some previously unstudied or misapprehended social phenomenon.⁵¹ Secondly, the new case is made into a “case study” by theoretically defining it and by demonstrating its causal connections to a more general process. Third, the methods and evidence from previously construed cases or hypothesized theories are either assessed in light of the case-studies’ results or are incorporated into it.⁵² Lastly, an argument is made for the ultimate scope of the results found in the case study. If the results of a “least-likely-case” are commensurate with the predictions or descriptions of the initial “guiding theory,” then the particular theory is strengthened and validated (at least for the time being). In contrast, if the results of a “most-likely-case” differ from the predictions or descriptions offered by the “guiding theory,” then the theory must be reanalyzed and possibly amended to enhance the fit between data and theory.⁵³ Thus, generalization and extrapolation are possible from case-studies and are, in fact, core features and the ultimate purpose of case-study analysis.

It must also be noted that many significant problems exist with both the experimental and statistical methods of social science research that make them problematic or less useful in certain instances. In this respect, the experimental and

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See Bates (et. al.), *Analytic Narratives*, 14 –18.

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Walton, “Making the Theoretical Case,” 125.

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Ibid.

⁵³ Bennett, “The Fallacy,” 7.

statistical methods are no different from the case-study method. The experimental method (which allows for situational manipulation and the elimination of rival hypotheses) can rarely be used for most research projects in political science. One cannot hold elections, create insurgencies, start wars, facilitate arms races, etc. in order to study them. Thus, the possibility of using the experimental method is usually quite limited in political science.

There are also many problems with using the statistical method. First, the statistical method is not appropriate for certain types of research projects, especially historically-oriented studies which try to describe and understand *what* happened (a particular historical outcome or process) in addition to explaining *why* and *how* it happened. Secondly, it is often simply not possible to gather the systematic or representative type of numerical data necessary for proper statistical manipulation. Third and more importantly, even if one could accumulate such data, the result of statistical significance testing is the discovery of correlations between variables and not causation. These correlations may point toward possible explanations, but only intensive analysis of specific cases can decipher the actual causal mechanisms and processes at work. This problem- generally termed the problem of the “black box”- is a glaring one in statistically-oriented research. Fourth, the “statistical method” also relies on elements of the “quasi-judicial” approach and is not free of “judgement calls.” For example, the same variables (or “concepts”) in statistical research can be constructed and operationalized in a variety of different ways and using different “proxy” measures often leads to differing results and conflicting conclusions from study to study. One example is the relatively recent, and continuing, debate on the validity and exact causal nature of the “democratic peace” theory.⁵⁴ The problem of “proper” conceptualization and operationalization of

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variables in statistical research is called “conceptual validity” or, in its pejorative sense, “concept stretching.” Significant work has been done in the methodological literature on statistical methods to try to avoid this and other such problems.

Thus, it should be noted that the quantitative/statistical approach, much like the case-study method, also has its own significant limitations. Unfortunately, many quantitative/statistically-oriented scholars fail to sufficiently acknowledge these deficiencies, and, instead, they tend to criticize the case-study approach based on the goals of the statistical method and without also critiquing the statistical method either “objectively” or from the perspective of the qualitative/case-study approach. I argue that the ability and willingness to do both, and this type of intellectual exchange are essential for critically discerning and appreciating both the comparative strengths and weaknesses of all methodological approaches.

CONCLUSION

So, what is the utility of the case-study method for social science research?

Scholars have identified several functions that the case-study method serves in the social sciences. First, it is argued that case-studies assist in the identification of relevant explanatory variables that may have been omitted in formal statistical models or other types of analysis which often make *a priori* decisions regarding the variables to be used.⁵⁵ Secondly, and in a related feature, case-studies are considered to be important for the derivation of new testable hypotheses emerging from the identification of potentially omitted variables.⁵⁶ These two functions of the case-study method imply that case-studies are an central part of “exploratory” or “descriptive” research that provides the

For the contribution of case-studies to the “democratic peace” debate see George and Bennett, *Case Studies*, 37-60.

⁵⁵ Bennett, “The Fallacy,” 8.

⁵⁶ George and Bennett, *Case Studies*, 20-21.

basis for subsequent empirical, mostly statistical, analysis. Third, it is argued that a primary strength and function of the case-study method is its ability to uncover potential causal mechanisms and processes that help explain the specific social or political outcome of interest.⁵⁷ Fourth, case-studies are considered to be efficacious for analyzing situations of complex causality in which the interaction of multiple variables through time supposedly produce the result in question.⁵⁸ Lastly, scholars have generally pointed to the inherent value of case-studies in describing and explaining a spatially and temporally-bound political or social phenomenon in an in-depth and rigorous manner. Thus, case-studies are seen as being important for describing both *what* happened and even possibly *why* or *how* it happened.

This paper does not take issue with the five specific points presented above, but it has also purposely tried to make an even wider argument putting the case-study method comparatively on par with supposedly superior quantitative/statistical approaches instead of only relegating it to be a mere pre-cursor for other modes of analysis. I have argued that the case-study method is an important tool for the analytic purpose of *theory-reformulation* or *theory-elaboration*. The culmination of multiple case-studies dealing with a particular social or political phenomenon of general interest also, in fact, contributes to the overall process of *theory-building* by enhancing the theory's accuracy and its utility. The ultimate goal of case-study analysis, as argued in this paper, is extrapolation and contributing to general social science theory. In this respect, the case-study method does not differ with other methods found in the political scientist's well-stocked "tool box." All are efficacious and necessary in their own comparative ways for helping a scholar better understand and analyze the complex world in which we live. As

⁵⁷ Ibid., 21; Bennett, *The Fallacy*," 6 and 8; and Gerring, "What Is a Case Study," 348-49.

⁵⁸ George and Bennett, *Case Studies*, 22.

the case-study method demonstrates, analyzing the specific helps understand the general and understanding the general helps analyze the specific. These are important methodological lessons.

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