On Casing a Study versus Studying a Case

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Most methods texts encourage students to define some site or event as a case (noun) that they will go out and study (verb). Cases are defined as real members of a general conceptual class: They exist "out there," in a sense, before we even arrive. Surveying available cases, researchers are encouraged to ask a series of analytic questions (which ones? how many? how likely? how typical?) and then select in a purposive way to answer a specific research question.

Valuable as it is, this approach has often felt foreign to practitioners of interpretive research. In his introduction to *What Is a Case?* Charles Ragin (1992, 6) recounts how his co-editor Howard Becker "persistently pulled the rug out from under" consensus along these lines:

> From his perspective, to begin research with a confident notion of… what *this*—the research subject—is a case of… is counterproductive. Strong preconceptions are likely to hamper conceptual development. Researchers probably will not know what their cases are until [later in the process]. What *it* is a case of will coalesce gradually, sometimes catalytically, and the final realization of [how the phenomenon is to be cased] may be the most important part of the interaction between ideas and evidence.

This sort of discomfort is the impetus for the current essay. In immersive research, we often enter research sites for practical and political reasons, or for reasons related to language, culture, funding, or something else. Our research strategies prioritize discovery and embrace changes in research goals and questions. For these and other reasons, we often wind up with an emerging study (noun) that we need to case (verb). As we learn in the field, we repeatedly encounter the challenge of how to conceptualize social action on broader analytic terms. Wrestling with what we are studying, we ask "what should I treat this as a case *of*?"

In this essay, I explore a critical yet underappreciated way case study methodologies may differ. "Nominal" approaches to casing, I suggest, offer a valid and vital alternative to the prevailing "realist" model. From a realist perspective, fluid and uncertain efforts to case a study, pursued in a shifting and ongoing way, may appear

ad hoc, suspect, and even "unscientific." Pressures to meet realist standards may dissuade researchers from pursuing strategies more appropriate for their project. At the writing stage, scholars may distort aspects of their study as they try to shoehorn what they've done into the realist model widely accepted as an ideal. By clarifying the nominal approach, we can promote a more pluralistic discipline, improve methodological guidance, and advance the goals of honesty, reflexivity, and transparency.

The Realist View

In political science today, most scholars conceive of case studies in a realist manner. In methods texts and faculty advisors' offices, the realist view tends to enjoy a taken-for-granted status. For most, it operates as a kind of common sense, deployed and taught without much reflection on its distinctiveness or felt need to justify its assumptions. It is simply woven, without notice, into matter-of-fact, how-to lessons for good practice in the social sciences.

The realist stance, as Charles Ragin (1992, 8) explains, posits that "there are cases (more or less empirically verifiable, as such) 'out there.'" Realism positions the researcher as an outside observer who *identifies and selects* from cases made available by the real world. Classes of cases should be defined to correspond with reality, "carving nature at its joints" to clearly specify boundaries of generalization. Given a well-specified "universe," phenomena either do or do not qualify as a particular sort of thing—a kind of event (e.g., revolution), institution (e.g., slavery), organization (e.g., political party), relation (e.g., colonial), actor (e.g., judge), activity (e.g., deliberation), belief system (e.g., Vedanta theology), or some such.

To employ the field's prevailing language of case *selection* is, in a sense, to adopt this realist position on the relationship between observer and observed. Cases exist in the world, in this view, as objects that correspond to a given category and, thus, as comparable units of analysis rightly analyzed together. Researchers choose among cases that exist, independent of the individual observer, as instances of a general social kind. They may do so in larger numbers for "extensive" analysis or subject a

smaller number to "intensive" analysis (Eckstein 1975). A case study, then, to quote John Gerring's (2004, 342) influential definition, is "an intensive study of a single unit for the purpose of understanding a larger class of (similar) units."

From this perspective, sound case study design requires careful attention to the risks of misclassification. In particular, researchers must avoid any sort of "conceptual stretching" that might distort the boundary of a general class and, thus, extend generalizations across non-comparable instances (Sartori 1970). To avoid this pitfall (that is, to ensure that concepts "travel" only to new cases that truly lie within a shared set of scope conditions), some realist texts encourage researchers to make use of different "levels" on a conceptual "ladder of abstraction" (Sartori 1970). Other accounts depart from the assumption of "crisp" classical categories to accommodate "family resemblance categories" (where varied traits define members of a shared category) and "radial categories" (where subtypes may be needed to preserve the integrity of comparisons) (see, e.g., Collier and Mahon 1993; Collier and Levitsky 1997). In all such variants, the realist stance urges scholars to make sure conceptual boundaries correspond to real-world differences and only comparable-in-reality cases are grouped together for analytic generalization.

Realist case selection, then, is a purposive activity with both theoretical and empirical aspects. A theory in use among scholars "covers" only cases that fall within its conditions, so little can be gained by selecting a case outside its scope. Among the theory-relevant options, cases should be chosen to leverage differences in their predicted outcomes and expectations about how a social phenomenon works. John Gerring (2008, 645—6) provides a concise statement of this perspective, emphasizing the shared logic of case analysis across research traditions:

> The case(s) identified for intensive study is chosen from a population and the reasons for this choice hinge upon the way in which it is situated within that population. This is the origin of the terminology—typical, diverse, extreme, et al. It follows that case-selection procedures in case-study research may build upon prior cross-case analysis…. Sometimes, these principles can be applied in a quantitative framework and sometimes they are limited to a qualitative framework. In either case, the logic of case selection remains quite similar, whether practiced in small-N or large-N contexts.

As Gerring suggests, the realist view plays a key role in the logic of controlled comparison (e.g., Przeworski and Teune 1970). In its most stringent form, realism prizes "unit homogeneity," treating cases as equivalent occasions to observe how causal factors covary with an outcome (e.g., King, Keohane, and Verba 1994; Geddes 1990). It is a mistake, though, to imagine that realism appears only in this guise. The realist approach is put to good use in within-case analyses that focus on "process tracing" and "causal process observations" (e.g., George and Bennett 2005; Brady and Collier 2010). It is compatible with efforts to engage the empirical richness of individual cases in ways that value case diversity (Slater and Ziblatt 2013). Theory-relevant cases may be defined in part by their distinctive conjunctions of conditions (e.g., Ragin 2000). Recognizing that factors may combine in multiple ways to yield a given outcome, generalizations may be built cautiously and piecemeal, under assumptions that not all cases work in the same way (Goldstone 2003).

None of these deviations from "classical" categories and controlled comparisons require a departure from realist tenets. Indeed, consider how one of the leading texts on process tracing, typological theorizing, and case diversity states the "requirements" a case study must meet to avoid being "nonscientific, noncumulative" and "atheoretical:"

> First, the investigator should clearly identify the universe—that is, the 'class' or 'subclass' of events—of which a single case or a group of cases to be studied are instances. Thus, the cases in a given study must all be instances…of only one phenomenon…. Second, a well-defined research objective and an appropriate research strategy to achieve that objective should guide the selection and analysis of a single case or several cases within the class or subclass of the phenomenon under investigation. Cases should not be chosen because they are 'interesting' or because ample data exist for studying them (George and Bennett 2005, 68—9).

Researchers can and do select cases for interpretive research in a realist manner. As Erica Simmons and Nicholas Smith (forthcoming) rightly note, "meanings, processes, and practices [can function as] the core drivers of case selection…. [C]ases can… refer to political processes, meaning-making practices, concepts, or events." Realism can also accommodate discovery in the field. Over the course of a study, one may encounter

unexpected features of the case that further specify or revise its status as most or least likely, deviant or typical. Corrective specifications grounded in the observable features of a case are wholly consistent with, and even recommended by, a realist approach (Ragin 2000).

That the prevailing approach *can* be extended in these ways, however, does not mean that it is the only game in town, nor always best. Neither the method nor the substance of what we study should be seen as an inherent reason to reject the realist approach. Rather, the problem lies in the field's elevation of this approach to a status of orthodoxy—a singular canon of correct practice that is violated when researchers deviate from it. In so doing, we deter the pursuit of valid alternatives that, for some projects, may be more fruitful. We also pressure researchers (especially graduate students) to distort the reporting of their work so that it conforms to the prevailing disciplinary model.

The Nominal View

"Social actions are comments on more than themselves," Clifford Geertz (1973, 23) famously observed: "Where an interpretation comes from does not determine where it can be impelled to go. Small facts speak to large issues, winks to epistemology, or sheep raids to revolution, because they are made to." Needless to say, Geertz is not suggesting that if we are interested in revolutions in general, we should select the local sheep raid as a theory-relevant case and design a study around it. His comment speaks instead to the possibility that we might "see a world in a grain of sand," as William Blake put it. The humble goings-on at a local research site can be framed in broad conceptual terms and "impelled" to speak to even the largest of scholarly, social, and political questions.

All case studies aim to advance knowledge of the world. But where the realist approach prioritizes ontological questions (Is this really a case of X? Does it truly exhibit the defining features of the population we are sampling from?), the nominal approach places greater emphasis on epistemological questions (What can be learned by treating this phenomenon as a case of X?). From a nominal perspective, "casing" is an ongoing research activity in which we seek to advance insight, understanding, and explanation by conceptualizing the particular in more abstract terms, as an instance bearing on something more general.

From this perspective, phenomena in the social world do not exist, inherently and really, as a case of any social (science) kind. They are ambiguous occasions for meaning-making, for researchers as much as for the participants who experience them in everyday life. Their relationship to general analytic categories is a question worth puzzling over and playing with—and thus, an opportunity for intellectual creativity. Experienced realities emerge as bona fide *cases* of something only, to echo Geertz, "because they are made to." As Charles Ragin (1992, 10) rightly notes: "At the start of the research, it may not be at all clear that a case can or will be discerned. Constructing cases does not entail determining their limits [as in the realist view], but rather pinpointing and then demonstrating their theoretical significance."

Nominal casing may be pursued at any point in a study, from the planning stages through fieldwork and into the writing process. Within a single study, the same bit of social action may be cased in different ways for different purposes. Each casing allows the researcher to put the study into dialogue with a different set of empirical phenomena, creating new standpoints for interpretation, new paths for generalization, and new terms for relational, processual, or comparative analysis. Studying a local one-stop center for social services, for example, I may initially case it as a "welfare agency" but then put it into dialogue with other cases defined by categories, such as "state bureaucracies" (like the police department), "policy-implementing organizations" (which include market firms), or "sites of citizen demand making" (such as the court or voting booth). I may case the social transactions at my site in terms of "disciplinary power" but then reframe them as a kind of "interaction ritual" where "presentations of self" get negotiated in ways that have significant consequences for politics and policy.

A published study built around a broad "umbrella" casing may move through analyses that frame site-specific relations or episodes in terms of different conceptual classes. In general terms, for example, I may frame my book as a case study of "domination and legitimation." Within this frame, my chapters may shift from interpreting social action as a case of "how identities get constructed through relations of exploitation," to analyzing it as a case of "how hegemony works through game-like logics." Each maneuver positions the study in relation to a different body of knowledge with its own tale to tell about why this thing matters and works in a particular way. Each specifies a different scope of analytic generalization, its own path for insights that travel. As I re-case my study, I create new interpretive opportunities

by putting the same social action into dialogue with different theories and empirical sets.

Of course, not all the things we conceptualize in our research rise to the level of a "case." Casing occurs only when we use an abstract concept to define a fundamental category and standpoint of analysis. It happens when we frame what we are studying in relation to a general type and forge a dialogue in which instances of this type become the basis for insights into one another. On one side, the concepts, theories, and empirical studies that prior scholars have used to illuminate the general type become interpretive resources for making sense of our study. On the other side, our empirically grounded insights become grist for interventions that may elaborate, contest, or revise conventional understandings of the class, as a whole.

In this regard, a nominal approach highlights the critical and disruptive potential of casing in a way that the realist view does not. As social science conventions, classes of cases operate as regulative norms and as lenses that naturalize particular understandings of phenomena. The realist approach encourages researchers to take these terms as given (established and warranted for reasons that correspond to real-world differences) and then to work within their parameters by selecting cases that belong in the conventional class. By contrast, a nominal perspective encourages scholars to approach the established casing of a phenomenon as an earlier intellectual (and perhaps political) act and, thus, as a site for critique, contestation, and reformulation.

By treating the question, what we might imagine this thing to be a case *of*, as contested ground, it is possible to denaturalize what may be taken for granted in our field. New casings of familiar social kinds, Howard Becker (1998, 6–7) rightly argues, "suggest ways of interfering with the comfortable thought routines academic life promotes and supports. [They] suggest ways to turn things around, to see things differently, in order to create new problems for research, new possibilities for comparing cases and inventing new categories, and the like." And insofar as the knowledge we produce matters for the production and governance of subjects in the broader world, as critical theorists suggest, such interventions can have significant implications for power and practice in societies as much as scholarship.

The nominal view does not counsel against purposive selections of where and what to study, nor does it treat casing as an inductive process to be deferred until entering the field. From a nominal perspective, creative efforts to case the study may be central to the research design phase, providing an explicit basis for the selection of where and what to study. This *preliminary casing* is both valuable and provisional. It helps position and focus the initial stages of research, defining the first steps in an ongoing process. A preliminary casing helps to orient the researcher but also stays in play as an object of reflection, critique, and re-specification. If the initial casing persists to the end of our study unaltered, it is not for lack of trying and is in no way a failure.

Unlike the realist view, however, a nominal approach does not treat explicit casing as a prerequisite at the research design phase. Here, it is important to distinguish casing from positioning within a site. Realist approaches often define sites as cases in the first instance, and base selection on a locale's properties in relation to a specific theory and population. Other reasons for selection are acknowledged as secondary at best.[1] From a nominal perspective, however, uncertainty about casing may be embraced as we prioritize other grounds for deciding where and what to study and how to position ourselves at a site. We may go to a site (or focus on a historical event) because we feel called to confront an injustice. We may choose based on our language skills, familiarity with a culture, social contacts, or the ways our identities are likely to be construed. We may be influenced by the body of available evidence, the costs and distances of locales, our ability to live comfortably in a place (and thus, carry out research for a long period), funders' priorities, and much more. In light of such concerns, it may be "best practice" to position ourselves at a site with a reasonably clear sense of our research interests and how to pursue them, but with little certainty about what our study will ultimately be a case *of*.

This openness to possible casings should not be confused with entering the field as a *tabula rasa*, devoid of ideas about what kind of case is at hand. Social science disciplines are disciplinary in the Foucauldian sense: We are trained to understand ourselves and others as particular kinds of subjects and to see phenomena in the world as "obviously" being of one kind or another. Our

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1 John Gerring (2008, 679), for example, takes up this possibility only after delivering his core prescriptions for case selection—as a secondary consideration that may influence selections *within* the group of cases identified as meeting more primary analytic criteria: "I have also disregarded pragmatic/logistical issues that might affect case selection. Evidently, case selection is often influenced by a researcher's familiarity with the language of a country, a personal entrée into that locale, special access to important data, or funding that covers one archive rather than another."

socialization, professional and otherwise, instills a kind of *habitus* that structures our predispositions to notice, perceive, and classify what we encounter in field or archival research (Brubaker 1993). Thus, nominal casing efforts should always be understood as *reflexive* practices aimed at our existing conceptions of the world—efforts to question and rework elements of our own feel for the kind of social action in play.

Nominal casing, then, should not be misread as an inductive counterpart to allegedly deductive realist procedures. Rather, it entails an evolving dialogue of fieldwork and framework in which site-specific experiences and observations are put into conversation with broader understandings of theory, history, and social structure (Sanjek 1990; Hopper 2003). As we go along, we consider alternative frameworks and try them on for size, thinking about various ways we might move from what we are studying toward larger analytic questions and generalizations. Shifts in casing frequently emerge from an *abductive* process in which experiences of puzzlement and doubt generate opportunities for reframing social action (Locke, Golden-Biddle, and Feldman 2008; Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012). The path to a catalytic moment of re-casing will often be paved by frustrated suspicions that something is just not right about how our framework fits together with our fieldwork. Indeed, one of the most productive suggestions an advisor might make to an exasperated dissertator is: "Maybe you're puzzled by what's happening because you're thinking about it as a case of X, rather than something else entirely."

Re-casing is, then, not so much a shift in research question as a maneuver in our efforts to explain and generalize. When Lisa Wedeen (2007) cases qāt chews in Yemen as political deliberation in the public sphere, for example, she asserts that these events can yield insights into other instances of deliberation, that the idea of deliberation can illuminate qāt chews in important ways, and that lessons drawn from a study of qāt chews can call general theories of deliberative democracy into question, justifying critiques and revisions. When we deem some bit of social action to be a case of the free rider problem—or a case of gender performance, classification struggle, the productive power of the gaze, or whatever—we assert something explanatory about how we think it works. When Timothy Pachirat (2011) cases action at a local slaughterhouse as an instance of the general relationship between visibility and power, for example, he immediately declares the relevance of theories associated with figures such as Zygmunt Bauman, Norbert Elias, and Michel Foucault, hailing them onto the scene as explanatory possibilities.

As these works by Wedeen and Pachirat suggest, nominal approaches to casing may *encourage* "stretching" concepts to unlikely instances that, in the commonsense of the field, seem misplaced. In *Unwanted Claims*, for example, I studied interactions with the welfare state as cases of political participation (Soss 2000). Political participation was among the most well-established areas of study in the discipline, defined and measured according to a clearly bounded set of research sites and behaviors. Welfare participation was not among them. Most political scientists took it as obvious that people in welfare programs were doing something quite different from the bona fide acts of political participation that served as "citizen inputs" in electoral-representative processes.

In field essays, I found realist explanations for the scope and content of "political participation," detailing why such voluntary acts (mostly aimed at selecting or influencing government officials) should not be confused with other activities people might like to think of as "political" in some way. Joseph LaPalombara (1978, 167, 188), for example, famously argued that sound generalizations about "political participation" require "careful and precise empirical denotation [and a] restricted scope of empirical reference." Responsible scholars must avoid the "indiscriminate and undiscriminating extension of concepts" to activities, institutions, and polities that do not truly (empirically) fit pluralist conceptions of liberal democracy. Citizen-initiated claims on the welfare state did not constitute a theory-relevant case, and poor people who made such claims received attention mainly for their *lack* of political engagement.

To case my comparative study of welfare participation on political terms, I had to intentionally *stretch* the concept of political participation. To do so, I looked beyond the behavioral literature to insights developed by feminist and participatory-democratic theorists. The casing that resulted was not persuasive to everyone. In a book review of *Unwanted Claims*, one prominent political scientist called it "an abuse of language" to classify and analyze welfare claiming as a case of political participation (Mead 2001, 676). But the casing of my study on these terms—born as I drafted the research design, developed and refined throughout my field research—underwrote virtually all of the book's scholarly contributions. It allowed me to challenge the field's tidy distinction between social citizenship and political citizenship. My field study of welfare participation became the basis for

a critical analysis of political participation in general, both as concept and practice. Theories of political participation directed my attention in the field and guided my empirical analyses of how welfare claiming emerges through a political process, how policy designs structure voice and quiescence, and how participatory experiences produce political subjects and patterns of status, belief, and action.

In retrospect, the casing pursued in *Unwanted Claims* was unusual only in its particulars: My *approach* to casing fell comfortably within a long and vibrant *nominal* tradition of case study research in the social sciences. By casing phenomena together in new and creative ways, scholars construct counter-intuitive standpoints for interpretation that draw new social and political dynamics into view. At the same time, we create empirical foundations for new critiques and revisions of concepts and theories in the field.

Conclusion: Reflecting on What We Teach

By clarifying the nominal alternative as a valid approach to casing, it is possible to see more clearly the downsides of faculty committees that pressure graduate students to define their cases at the outset and use them as a basis for nearly every aspect of their research design and strategy. *A priori* casing is valuable for the purposes of many projects. But deep investments in a casing, prior to entering the field, also carry substantial risks of lock-in and tunnel vision. In many research projects, settled and enforced case definitions can work to foreclose insights and constrain research in rigid and undesirable ways. Graduate students who have been pushed in this manner may be particularly likely to experience their casing as an almost-inescapable trap. Having built the entire edifice of a project around a particular casing, and having won a go-ahead from the committee only on this basis, is it any wonder that a dissertator might not relish the prospect of declaring that what they are studying should probably be thought of as a case of something else? Really, who would want to open *that* can of worms?

The nominal alternative is to encourage graduate students to try out different ways of casing their study from the get-go. By advising students to see their preliminary casing as a provisional standpoint, adopted for now as one possibility among many, faculty advisors can legitimate and foster research practices that embrace generative doubt and make casing into an ongoing subject of reflexive critique. In so doing, we can begin to bridge the gap that students encounter as they move from positivist and realist texts on case study design into more interpretive texts that emphasize open-ended processes of discovery and abductive reasoning. Frustrated by confusing tensions between the two, many scholars who pursue interpretive and critical studies avoid the language of case study research altogether. A more fruitful path forward is to be transparent about working within an alternative and equally valid case study tradition, seizing the analytic opportunities that only reflections on general kinds can provide.

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