

R2: Ayobami Ojebode on Comparative Case Studies

A case study is a detailed up-close examination of a subject in its real context. A case study is a story really. A story that is rich in context, that is also rich in depth. What makes case studies to be different from other methods or other ways of thinking about research, is that it employs multiple sources of information and employs a variety of methods and it is also flexible.

A case in a case study is an entity. An episode, an event, a person, a city, a village, a whole country, even a whole continent can be a case, depending on the level of engagement. A whole hospital can be a case, but a patient can also be a case. Staff in hospital can be a case, even the section of staff be a case. Again depending on the research problem that is being tackled, which again informs the research question and the level of engagement.

A case study can be descriptive or causal.

Descriptive case studies seek to examine an entity and describe its dynamics, its structure, its characteristics and qualities. Whereas a causal case study tries to explain the forces behind an outcome. Whereas a descriptive case study focuses on characteristics, a causal case study tries to explain why something is the way it is, and not the other way around.

A comparative case study is typically aimed at explaining causality. In other words, most causal case studies are comparative. And in comparative case studies, cases appear in a way that holds a number of factors constant, while varying some other factors. And comparative case studies require very clever design. Designs that are thorough on context but that successfully foreground the context in order to give a causal argument that is our explanation that is strong enough. In comparative case studies, for instance, two or more cases are compared but it may be also two or more episodes of a case, for instance, in longitudinal designs. A city can be examined at regular intervals, and each interval is taken as a case on its own, and these intervals are compared so that explanations can be made about what is bringing change in the city or what is maintaining the *status quo*.

Case studies have a number of strengths and that is why we should bother about them. Case studies can help us to establish causality through very careful designs. Case studies can prove to us why something happens in ways that are very very credible and can provide a platform for policy decisions. Case studies are also strong where it comes to contextualising factors or findings because a case study pays very good attention to the context that give actions their meanings. Case studies are also very strong in establishing causal mechanism, and helping us to make causal inferences. Typically, causal inferences and causality are understood by many people as things that can only be drawn in quantitative terms. But through a careful combination of qualitative methodology, maybe with quantitative or maybe on its own, case studies can help to explain causality. Another strength of case study is that it employs multiple methods, and therefore is able to go at the problem from a variety of methods, which again make its findings to be more rounded and more credible.

Case study designs are not without their flaws. For instance when it comes to making generalisations case studies are not the best of choices because very deep particular

attention is paid to a case in its peculiar context and then to generalise beyond this scope, conditions and context becomes a very difficult issue. That is why case studies may not be very attractive to people who are seeking findings to inform policies that will be applied across a number of cases beyond the case that was chosen for the study.

Another weakness of case studies is that they are time consuming, comparing with, let's say surveys or even experiments. Planning long term is often required when it comes to doing case studies. Thank you.