

The Case Study at the Core of Qualitative Empirical Inquiry

O Estudo de Caso no Centro da Investigação Empírica Qualitativa

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Gomes Neto, J. M. W., Albuquerque, R. B., & Silva, R. F. (2024).
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In “Estudos de Caso: Manual para a Pesquisa Empírica Qualitativa”, José Mário Wanderley Gomes Neto, Rodrigo Barros de Albuquerque, and Renan Francelino da Silva (2023) provide a comprehensive contribution to the Portuguese-language body of scientific literature on case studies. The book combines conceptual frameworks, methodological discussions, real-world examples, and a practical step-by-step guide for applying case studies in qualitative empirical research.

In doing so, the authors make a significant contribution to addressing a long-standing gap in Portuguese-language scholarship within the Social Sciences, which can be divided into two main issues: i) the scarcity of systematic publications with roadmaps for the application of qualitative methods and techniques in Brazil (Soares, 2005; Barberia, Godoy, and Barboza, 2014); and ii) the lack of methodological training in qualitative techniques in graduate programs in Political Science and International Relations in the Global South (Medeiros et al., 2016; Suppressed self-citation).

The book is a timely and essential addition to the existing literature, addressing the needs of Portuguese-speaking researchers seeking methodological guidance. Building on the foundations laid by seminal works such as Robert K. Yin (1984) and John Gerring (2006), which have long dominated the field, Gomes Neto, Albuquerque, and Silva (2024) provide a localized perspective that engages with the unique context of scientific practice in the Global South.

The book is organized into two sections, each consisting of four chapters. The first section focuses on theoretical and conceptual frameworks, while the second explores the application of case studies in empirical research.

In Chapter 1, “What Are Cases?”, the authors aim to clarify the concept of a case as presented in the literature, exploring its definitions and evolving perspectives

over time. They establish criteria for selecting cases in empirical research and provide various historical examples to illustrate how the notion of a case can differ across studies, emphasizing its procedural function. The chapter highlights the requirements for a phenomenon to qualify as a case study: the research question must be qualitative, and the selected case must contain the necessary information to address the question. Additionally, case selection is guided by qualitative inferential logic, which relies on the case's informational sufficiency in relation to the research problem.

In Chapter 2, "What Is Case Study Research?", the authors, building on the premise that a hypothetical case has already been selected, delve into the nature and execution of case study research. They emphasize the empirical and qualitative nature of this method, asserting that: (i) case studies cannot be conducted if the core of the research is not empirical, and (ii) case studies should be understood as intrinsically connected to a qualitative culture or approach.

In the first topic, the authors engage in a dialogue with critics who highlight the prevalence of publications inaccurately labeled as case studies despite lacking empirical research (Soares, 2005; Suppressed self-citation). In the second topic, they address post-KKV arguments (Mahoney, 2010), which assert that the distinctions between qualitative and quantitative approaches are more than stylistic—they represent fundamentally different cultures, akin to a „skin, not a sweater“ (Marsh, and Furlong, 2002; Goertz, and Mahoney, 2012; Suppressed self-citation). Finally, the authors differentiate the case study method from the teaching technique that uses case studies.

In Chapter 3, "What Is a Case Study For?", the authors outline key parameters for applying this method, including the nature of the data—whether longitudinal or cross-sectional—and the number of cases, distinguishing between single-case and multiple-case studies. Among the examples discussed, the authors highlight Dahl's (2005) work, which they identify as a case study employing longitudinal data.

In Chapter 4, „Which Research Problems Are Suitable for a Case Study?“, the authors argue that this method is most appropriate when the research problem is empirical and qualitative, aiming to explore the explanations, mechanisms, and causes behind a phenomenon, particularly when focusing on contemporary events. Building on this definition, the authors provide guidance throughout the chapter on how researchers can determine whether their work aligns with these criteria.

In Chapter 5, "Descriptive Case Study", the authors provide a structured guide for researchers conducting descriptive case studies. They outline key concepts and definitions, as well as the stages of the research process: (i) deriving the research problem from the existing literature, (ii) identifying the case, (iii) describing the collected information, and (iv) analyzing the data and formulating a hypothesis. Aligning with the literature (Tobin, 2010), the authors emphasize that a descriptive case study cannot compare groups in its analysis, draw causal inferences, or aim to describe an unexplored object. Based on these principles, the chapter includes

examples of studies that have successfully employed this technique.

In Chapter 6, „Explanatory (Causal) Case Study“, the authors discuss the techniques used in this approach, distinguishing it from previous methods by emphasizing its focus on uncovering, measuring, and testing causal relationships. In this context, case studies in this type of research are aimed at identifying mechanisms, logical configurations, or conditions that explain the occurrence of an event. Building on the concepts of how and why something happens, this type of analysis follows these steps: (i) identifying the case and its relationship to theoretical expectations (whether it is typical or divergent); (ii) addressing the causal origin of the problem and locating potential hypotheses in the literature; (iii) collecting and analyzing data; and (iv) theorizing the causal explanation and comparing it with theoretical expectations. Finally, the chapter includes examples to illustrate how each aspect of this technique is applied in practice.

In Chapter 7, “Exploratory Case Study”, the authors discuss the potential, applicability, and limitations of this method. Recognizing that an exploratory case study is also descriptive, though the reverse is not true, they establish parameters for conducting rigorous research in this domain. By introducing new insights into a known phenomenon through a case not encompassed by theoretical expectations, researchers can shed light on issues previously overlooked in the scientific literature. Unlike explanatory case studies, where hypotheses are central, in exploratory case studies, hypotheses emerge as a result of the research process. By contrasting existing theories and prior inferences with new information and cases previously unknown to the literature, exploratory case studies enable the formulation of testable hypotheses that contribute to updating existing paradigms.

In Chapter 8, “Collective Case Study”, the authors explore the comparative potential of this method, which is part of the field of qualitative comparative methods. They demonstrate how research can use multiple cases to understand how they relate to a phenomenon, identifying patterns, similarities, differences, particularities, and regularities. This approach allows for a deeper exploration of issues inherent to groups of cases, which might not be captured through individual analysis during data collection and examination. It is particularly well suited for subnational and regional studies.

By adopting an introductory approach, both conceptually and in providing a practical step-by-step guide to case studies, “Estudos de Caso: Manual para a Pesquisa Empírica Qualitativa” addresses a historical gap in Portuguese-language scientific production on qualitative methodology in the Global South. Moreover, the authors, including two Brazilian university professors, prioritize clarity and a didactic approach to contribute to the broader understanding and accurate application of case study methods.

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