Case-Selection [for case studies]: A Diversity of Methods and Criteria

Description

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Excerpt: â??Case-selection plays a pivotal role in case study research. This is widely acknowledged, and is implicit in the practice of describing case studies by their method of selection â?? typical, deviant, crucial, and so forth. It is also evident in the centrality of case-selection in methodological work on the case study, as witnessed by this symposium. By contrast, in large-N cross-case research one would never describe a study solely by its method of sampling. Likewise, sampling occupies a specialized methodological niche within the literature and is not front-and-center in current methodological debates. The reasons for this contrast are revealing and provide a fitting entrÃ©e to our subject.

First, there is relatively little variation in methods of sample construction for cross-case research. Most samples are randomly sampled from a known population or are convenience samples, employing all the data on the subject that is available. By contrast, there are myriad approaches to case-selection in case study research, and they are quite disparate, offering many opportunities for researcher bias in the selection of cases (â??cherry-pickingâ?•).

Second, there is little methodological debate about the proper way to construct a sample in cross-case research. Random sampling is the gold standard and departures from this standard are recognized as inferior. By contrast, in case study research there is no consensus about how best to choose a case, or a small set of cases, for intensive study.

Third, the construction of a sample and the analysis of that sample are clearly delineated, sequential tasks in cross-case research. By contrast, in case study research they blend into one another. Choosing a case often implies a method of analysis, and the method of analysis may drive the selection of cases.

Fourth, because cross-case research encompasses a large sample â?? drawn randomly or incorporating as much evidence as is available â?? its findings are less likely to be driven by the composition of the sample. By contrast, in case study research the choice of a case will very likely determine the substantive findings of the case study.

Fifth, because cross-case research encompasses a large sample claims to external validity are fairly easy to evaluate, even if the sample is not drawn randomly from a well-defined population. By contrast, in case study research it is often difficult to say what a chosen case is a case of â?? referred to as a problem of â??casing.â?•

Finally, taking its cue from experimental research, methodological discussion of cross-case research tends to focus on issues of internal validity, rendering the problem of case-selection less relevant. Researchers want to know whether a study is true for the studied sample. By contrast, methodological discussion of case study research tends to focus on issues of external validity. This could be a product of the difficulty of assessing case study evidence, which tends to demand a great deal of highly

specialized subject expertise and usually does not draw on formal methods of analysis that would be easy for an outsider to assess. In any case, the effect is to further accentuate the role of case-selection. Rather than asking whether the case is correctly analyzed readers want to know whether the results are generalizable, and this leads back to the question of case-selection.â?•

Other recent papers on case selection methods:

Herron, M.C., Quinn, K.M., 2014. *A Careful Look at Modern Case Selection Methods.* Sociological Methods & Research
Nielsen, R.A., 2014. Case Selection via Matching.
http://www.mit.edu/~rnielsen/Case%20Selection%20via%20Matching.pdf

Category

1. Journal article

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