Methods of Analysis
Historical Case Study

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A historical case is a particular someone or something in the past that can be conceptually aggregated and temporally limited (e.g., a person, couple, family, group, collaborative, community, network, etc. or controversy, event, discovery, invention, medium, phenomenon, situation, text, etc.). Typically chosen and assembled with a purpose, a historical case is an example or exemplification used to demonstrate, exemplify, and illustrate or alternatively contradict and undermine a claim or thesis. Indeed, a case provides evidence. Recognizing that the past is disaggregated and not a totality, a case is nonetheless an aggregation, combination, or crystallization (Tambiah, 1976, p. 5).

It would seem that historical method has always implied case study if interpreted as the history of single events, episodic history as different from universal history, *courtes durées* as different from *longues durées*. From the early twentieth century, historical case study was basically biography, particularities of individuals used to counter the "vast amount of generalization" marking most histories and textbooks (Nichols, 1927, p. 270). Yet historical case study, in the way historians think of it, is primarily a post-WWII methodology developed through Harvard University's planning for science in general education (Hamlin, 2016). Merton's (1938, p. 495) *Science, Technology and Society in Seventeenth Century England* suggested the value of case histories but Conant's (1947) *On Understanding Science* demonstrated the method as it would be articulated and popularized by colleagues and graduate students, including Kuhn (Fuller, 2000a, 2002). From 1948 through 1970, editions of the *Harvard Case Histories in Experimental Science* provided a range of examples for research and teaching. By the early 1970s, case studies were the default for histories of science and technology, if not for a balance of social sciences. Primarily through Nelkin's (1971, 1979) research, case studies of controversies in media, science, and technology accounted for an increasingly large share of the cases.

Although since the 1950s, case histories were increasingly popular in research in media studies and STS, the method has retained its educational purpose (Fuller, 2000; Hamlin, 2016). At their best, "historical case studies provide an authentic view of science and technology in action," Pleasants (2017) reiterates. He also observes that "contemporary examples can be useful, but historical cases are often more conceptually accessible to students" (p. 40). The premise, Smulyan (1994) reminds us, is that "examining a small piece can illuminate the whole." She continues: "In both the scientific experiment and the historical case study, scholars look at one example in order to learn about a larger field" (p. 850). But she cautions:

> At the same time that we rely on these methodologies, we also want to explore with students another idea— that any reduction is a distortion, that the scientist or historian who chooses the small part that stands for the whole in effect shapes our knowledge of what happened. (p. 851)

The history of historical case study, especially at Harvard, reinforces insights into how and why historians make a number of choices in constructing a case. For instance, Nash (1952) indicates

that among choices are its "*technical core*," "*historical core*," "*human aspects*," setting "*in intellectual and social history*," and "*modern relevance of the facts and ideas*" (pp. 106-111). While Nash likens the process to reassembling a building from rubble of the past, Ginzburg (1980) compares the historical case method to detective work following a crime scene. "Reality is opaque," he says, "but there are certain points— clues, signs— which allow us to decipher it" (p. 27). Like the Harvard historians and Smulyan, Ginzburg repeats that case histories are "aphoristic" as "apparently negligible details can reveal deep and significant phenomena" (p. 28). Hamilton, Howard, and Pick (2008) stress:

> Historical cases are not ready made; nor do they lend themselves to definitive solution; they are unlikely to stare one in the eye from the start, and the cast list itself often mutates as we go along. Some 'noirish' private eye stories might provide a better approximation, where an opening 'commission' folds mysteriously into another, and the disconsolate investigator is drawn ever further into the murk. (p. i)

Although Street and Ward (2010) include historical case study in the family of "longitudinal case study designs," counter-intuitively, they exclude it from "retrospective case study." Of course, a historical case is assembled retrospectively or after the fact but they assert that a second criterion is that researchers "have access to informants who were involved in the events or phenomena being studied." Oral histories aside, this is true enough in that historians typically do not collect data from participants giving "first-hand accounts." Strangely, the *Encyclopedia of Case Study Research*, the volume that includes this entry, excludes historical case study as an entry (Mills, Durepos & Wiebe, 2010).

With just a few exceptions, so taken for granted is historical case study that most contemporary books and collections on historiography and methods omit it as well. Among exceptions is a 2016 forum in the *History of Education Quarterly* (*HEQ*). However much the *HEQ* forum focuses on "teaching [history] with case studies," for academic historians this is inseparable from their research. The first paper in the forum summarizes challenges for historical research and teaching and asks, "is it even possible to teach history *without* case studies?" "We tend to use terms such as *examples* and *case studies* interchangeably," Dougherty (2016) continues, "which is symptomatic of our problem" of clarifying what is meant by historical case method (p. 216).

Historians are well aware of problems with the reliance on case studies but trends toward microhistory, as Ginzburg (1980) suggested, limit the options. Indeed, Braudel (1958/2009), an advocate of the *longues durées*, was dismayed that "the return to the short term is going on before our very eyes" (p. 177). Most historians avoid generalizing from the "small part that stands for the whole," Smulyan (1994) cautions: "looking at simplified pieces ignores the interactions, among the smaller studies and between the chosen examples and the whole, and so masks the complexity inherent in the natural and social worlds" (p. 851). It may be a thin line between elevating actors or phenomena to makers of history and transforming them into historical cases of something. Fuller (2000b) overlooks this critical potential of historical research but the point is well taken: "case studies are typically evaluated merely in terms of their descriptive adequacy ('Does it tell a good story?')." Whether in media studies and STS or economics and politics, do historians face pressures to reduce a "good story" to a "good news story," as if students and the public demand such a peculiar didactic?

1. What is a Case?
    a. Shulman (1992, p. 21): a case has a narrative, a story, a set of events that unfolds over time in a particular place.
    b. Ragin (1992, p. 3): To the question "What is a case?" most social scientists would have to give multiple answers. A case may be theoretical or empirical or both; it may be a relatively bounded object or a process; and it may be generic and universal or specific in some way. Asking "What is a case?" questions many different aspects of empirical social science.
        i. p. 9:

Table I.1. *Conceptual map for answers to "What is a case?"*

Understanding of cases	Case conceptions	
	Specific	General
As empirical units	1. Cases are found (Harper)	2. Cases are objects (Vaughan)
As theoretical constructs	3. Cases are made (Wieviorka)	4. Cases are conventions (Platt)

2. What is a Historical Case?
    a. Nichols (1926, pp. 270-271): Hamilton, Howard, and Pick (2008, p. 1): The increasing interest in biography makes timely a consideration of its value as an aid to the teaching of history. The study of biography has many purposes when used in connection with historical study, but this discussion will be confined to its use as a "case" method. The purpose of a "case" method is the production of a clearer and more accurate understanding of the process of social change and development.... Survey courses are valuable and indispensable as introductions; the historical forces are present and potent, but so often a student loses sight of the processes, forgets the individual and his place in social change. History, to be sure, has to do with groups, but these groups are composed of individuals in spite of the fact that as such they are generally lost sight of in the multitude.
    b. Ogburn (1934, p. 261): The case-study method, when properly pursued, is an attempt to get at behavior by the historical method. Studies of social change rely also on the historical method. The historical method in the social sciences is of course more than merely the history of single events. It is also the history of relationships, and, when these relationships are successive, of processes. To describe the events of the past, though difficult enough in some instances, is much more simple than to describe accurately processes and relationships. Early writers in social science were concerned a great deal with describing what they called social processes. But soon it was found that further detailed descriptive work was needed. So there followed this increase in the use of the historical method.
    c. Nash (1952, pp. 106-111): What Constitutes a Case History
        i. The technical core of the case

ii. *The historical core of the case*
iii. *The setting of the case in... history*
iv. *The human aspects of the situation*
v. *The setting of the case in general intellectual and social history*
vi. *The modern relevance of the facts and ideas involved*

d. Lakatos (1970, p. 138): *In writing a historical case study, one should, I think, adopt the following procedure: (i) one gives a rational reconstruction; (2) one tries to compare this rational reconstruction with actual history and to criticize both one's rational reconstruction for lack of historicity and the actual history for lack of rationality. Thus any historical study must be preceded by a heuristic study: history of science without philosophy of science is blind.*
e. Tambiah (1976, p. 5): Sartre in his preface to *Search for a Method* (1968) makes this statement: "Do we have the means to constitute a structural, historical anthropology?... if such a thing as a Truth can exist in anthropology, it must be truth that has become, and it must make itself a totalization." In interpreting this remark I have taken as my task the understanding of the "becoming" of Buddhism and its sangha in their association with the polity as a total social fact. Totalization for me then means how the systematically accountable, in terms of continuities and transformations in an open-ended way, produces a historical totality that is best understood not in disaggregation but in combination. It implies thus the passage of a totality and its "becoming" in its present shape over time.
f. Ginzburg (1980, pp. 27-28): But that same conjectural paradigm, in this case used to develop still more sophisticated controls over the individual in society, also holds the potential for understanding society. In a social structure of ever-increasing complexity like that of advanced capitalism, befogged by ideological murk, any claim to systematic knowledge appears as a flight of foolish fancy. To acknowledge this is not to abandon the idea of totality. On the contrary; the existence of a deep connection which explains superficial phenomena can be confirmed when it is acknowledged that direct knowledge of such a connection is impossible. Reality is opaque; but there are certain points— clues, signs— which allow us to decipher it.
g. This idea, which is at the heart of the conjectural or semiotic paradigm, has made itself a place in a wide range of intellectual contexts, most deeply affecting the human sciences. Minute graphic characteristics have been used to reconstruct cultural shifts and transformations (in direct line from Morelli, settling a debt owed by Mancini to Allacci almost three centuries earlier). The flowing robes of Florentine paintings in the 15th century, the linguistic innovations of Rabelais, the healing of the king's evil (*scrofula*) by French and English monarchs (to take a few of many possible examples), have each been taken as small but significant clues to more general phenomena: the outlook of a social class, or of a writer, or of an entire society. The discipline of psychoanalysis, as we have seen, is based on the hypothesis that apparently negligible details can reveal deep and significant phenomena. Side by side with the decline of the systematic approach, the aphoristic one gathers strength— whether through a Nietszche or an Adorno. Even the word aphoristic is revealing. (It is an indication, a symptom, a clue: there is no getting away from our paradigm.)

        i. Hamilton, Howard, and Pick (2008, p. 1): Ginzburg's richly suggestive article, 'Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method' (*History Workshop Journal* 9, 1980), invited the reader to consider how the roots of historical method lay in earlier forms of conjectural knowledge. It cast its net provocatively wide— in search of underlying continuities across large swathes of time— but also pinpointed 'uncanny' affinities between seemingly disparate areas of thought and cultural practice that emerged abruptly in the late nineteenth century. Ginzburg showed how, almost contemporaneously, the detective, the psychoanalyst, the forensic scientist and the art connoisseur used tiny clues to lead them to discoveries that were anything but trivial.
    h. Retrospective Case Study
        i. Street and Ward (2010): These three types of longitudinal case studies differ along two dimensions: (1) whether the events being studied have already occurred and (2) whether researchers have access to informants who were involved in the events or phenomena being studied. Both retrospective and concurrent case study designs typically include informant interviews in the data set, whereas historical designs do not.
3. Critique of Historical Case Study
    a. Braudel (1958/2009, pp. 175-177): So let us try to use clearer language, replacing "event" with "short term"— which is on the scale of the individual, of daily life, of our illusions, of our momentary awarenesses. It is the preferred time of the chronicler and the journalist. Now, let us then observe that a chronicle or a newspaper offers us, in addition to great, so- called historical events, the trivial happenings of ordinary life- a fire, a train accident, the price of wheat, a crime, a theatrical performance, a flood. Everyone thus realizes that there exists a short term in every sphere of life- the economic, social, literary, institutional, religious, even the geographic (a gust of wind, a tempest- as well as in the political. At first glance, the past is this mass of detailed facts, some spectacular, others obscure and constantly repeated, the kind of facts which these days are the regular quarry of the microsociologist or sociometrists (and of the microhistorian as well). But this massive array does not constitute the whole thick reality of history that we may subject to careful scientific reflection. Social science feels almost repelled by the event. And not without cause. The short term is the most capricious, the most deceptive of time periods.... But, most of all, there has been a shift of traditional historiographical temporality. A day, a year might seem appropriate lengths of time for a political historian. Time was the sum of days. But if one wanted to measure a price curve, a demographic progression, wage trends, variations in interest rates, the study of production (more hoped for than achieved), a close analysis of trade, it required much longer measures of time.... Logically, this recitative, by the simple process of going beyond its temporal limits, should have led us to the *longue durée*. But, for many reasons, this logical next step was not taken, and a return to the short term is going on before our very eyes.
        i. Wallerstein (2009, p. 161): But in French there exists an adjectival form, *événementiel*. So a short *durée* is temps *événementiel*. How does one translate that? What some people do is to translate it as "the time of the

event," but I don't think that makes any sense whatsoever. It isn't the time of the event. It's a time that is "event-ish." I found a solution which no one else uses; I decided the only way to translate this into English that made any kind of sense is to call it episodic history. An episode is like an event and episodic does exist in the English language.

b. Smulyan (1994, p. 851): At the same time that we rely on these methodologies, we also want to explore with students another idea—that any reduction is a distortion, that the scientist or historian who chooses the small part that stands for the whole in effect shapes our knowledge of what happened, and that looking at simplified pieces ignores the interactions, among the smaller studies and between the chosen examples and the whole, and so masks the complexity inherent in the natural and social worlds.
c. Fuller (2000, pp. 8, 28): The impasse between Collins and Latour is symbolized by the Janus-faced character of STS's much vaunted case study methodology. On the one hand, in Collins's view, case studies create intellectual entitlements for the STS practitioner that effectively restrict the "community of inquirers" simply to those with similar training and experience. On the other hand, in Latour's view, because case studies are typically evaluated merely in terms of their descriptive adequacy ("Does it tell a good story?"), and not some larger normative context, they can be of potential use to a wide range of users, most notably those who do not share the STS researcher's personal or professional commitments. But regardless of whether Collins's or Latour's view prevails, the dynamic spirit of critical inquiry loses [i.e., "What is the normative conclusion that should be drawn from" each particular case study?].