

PHD THESIS SUMMARY: Using case studies in the social sciences: methods, inferences, purposes

Introduction

Although there are trends and changes in academic culture, case-based reasoning remains a consistent form of analysis in the social sciences, humanities, and even moral thinking. This method locates the source of our epistemic and moral intuitions in the specificity of particular cases.

There are different traditions of reasoning with cases and using case studies in academia, and this thesis focuses primarily on the use of case studies in the social sciences to formulate, establish, and generalize causal hypotheses. Additionally, the thesis investigates the use of causal findings generated by case studies to inform policy making in the social realm.

The thesis is divided into four chapters. The first chapter characterizes two alternative views of case studies and the understanding of science they are embedded in. The first approach considers case studies a weaker form of experimental, statistical, or comparative methods, while the second approach sees case studies as an autonomous epistemic genre.

Chapter 2 addresses internal validity in historical narratives, which are case studies that formulate and substantiate causal hypotheses by describing the events leading to a particular outcome. These narratives typically use process-tracing and comparison methods to draw causal inferences.

However, the understanding of how process-tracing operates in historical narratives is still unclear, and there are no shared criteria to assess its epistemic contribution. Current conditions proposed to tie the validity of findings to specific evidence are unhelpful when that evidence is not available.

The persistence of case-based reasoning across various academic fields, including social sciences, humanities, and moral thinking, is notable despite changing trends. This form of analysis is broadly understood to locate the source of our epistemic and moral intuitions in specific, idiosyncratic cases.

Literature Review

While different traditions of reasoning with cases exist, this thesis primarily focuses on the use of case studies in the social sciences to formulate, establish, and generalize causal hypotheses, as well as to inform policy making.

The thesis is organized into four chapters, with chapter 1 presenting two alternative views of case studies and the understanding of science in which they are embedded.

The first view, which emerged in the 1970s, considers case studies as a weaker form of experimental, statistical, or comparative methods and evaluates them using criteria from other methodological traditions.

The second view, which has been developing gradually in recent decades, sees case studies as an autonomous epistemic genre.

Chapter 2 addresses internal validity in historical narratives, which are case studies that use process-tracing to draw causal inferences and often rely on comparison.

The author argues that existing criteria for assessing process-tracing performance are unduly restrictive and formulates new conditions to evaluate it when favorable evidential circumstances do not occur.

In chapter 3, the author outlines the traditional view on external validity, which reduces it to issues of representativeness and recommends the use of case studies when internal validity is the primary research goal.

However, this approach overlooks the fact that case studies are often used to draw lessons from studied cases and carry them over to new contexts yet unstudied, thus rendering the debate on generalizability of case-study results incomplete.

In summary, your thesis focuses on the challenges of validity and generalizability in case study research, as well as the relevance of research findings to policy making.

You argue that traditional views on external validity in case study research have limited the debate and that more attention should be given to making case studies comparable rather than selecting typical cases.

Additionally, you analyze the strategies for improving the external validity of causal effects in policy making, such as RCTs, cross-country regressions, and Heckman's causal models.

You argue that these strategies have limitations in addressing the distinct concerns of relevance and external validity and that case-study evidence is relevant to the crucial phases of planning in policy making.

REFERENCES

Morgan, Mary. 2012. Case studies: one observation or many? Justification or discovery? *Philosophy of Science*, 79 (5): 667-677