

## Book Review

Sena, Barbara. 2024. *The Case Study in Social Research. History, Methods, and Applications*. London, New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group

María Eugenia Rausky   
National University of La Plata, Argentina

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18778/1733-8077.20.3.06>

Those involved in teaching social research methods and supervising students in social sciences will probably agree that case study is one of the most frequently used approaches for research (Tight 2010).

However, for many experts in the field, the term case study has a certain ambiguity. It is a sort of slogan or catchword often used as an excuse for everything.

This indiscriminate practice has transformed its methodological status into something suspicious that, in the words of John Gerring (2007:7),

has made it “survive in a curious methodological limbo.” Still, again, we come across the same problem, that is, the ambiguity in its use and the light-handed way in which the term is often mistakenly used—a practice that has emptied it of useful meaning. For this reason, the book centers the debate on the need to use case studies in social research with “methodological awareness” (something that is not common). Such a diagnosis has led Barbara Sena to produce a text with a language and structure that can be located “halfway between the classic introductory volumes of a particular method and monographs aimed at investigating specific methodological issues” (p. 1).

Those interested specifically in case studies, as well as those interested in general issues concerning methodology and methods of social research (whether doing empirical research or teaching methodology), will find elaborate and well-founded answers in Sena's recently published book, and a wide range of questions and doubts we often have to face when using such a versatile and rich approach.

What is a case study? A method? A strategy? An approach? A type of research design? What are the differences between a case and a case study? What does the case study offer compared to other research approaches? What are the links between it and quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods? What distinguishes it from other methodological approaches? What is the origin of the confusion and lack of consensus concerning case studies? Sena offers systematic and coherent answers to such and other questions that permeate the case study.

The book is presented as a resource for social sciences, especially for sociologists. The Author lays out the need for such kind of clarification given that two major references in the literature, Robert Stake and Robert Yin, are neither sociologists nor methodologists of social research in the strict sense. Moreover, their works are not always adaptable to the specific scope of sociology and social research.

The wide range of specialized literature covered in the book and the Author's experience in the research field and university teaching allowed offering a rigorous and systematic work of great didactic value. Sena states that the purpose of the volume is to offer material highly accessible to a diverse public. For this reason, she avoids complex explanations on how to define and apply case studies and rather focuses on those elements that are shared across

a wide range of literature on the subject. In this dialogue with methodological literature, Sena recovers different arguments she considers relevant and constructs a clear synthesis of each of the subjects uncovered. Those arguments are by no means a repetition of the work of leading authors. On the contrary, Sena shows the nuances, tensions, inconsistencies, and gaps in knowledge that many of those references leave open, although they require some kind of answer. Using examples in practically every topic throughout the book, Sena builds a path to an educational resource able to constructively orientate the reader.

The volume is divided into seven chapters. The first two are socio-historical. The first gives a general perspective on the features of social research and the methodological debate that have influenced the recognition and spread of some methods and lines of research to the detriment of others. "In any case, the case study should be framed within the clash between quantitative and qualitative methods and in the recent affirmation of the mixed method orientation in the field of social research" (p. 3). The second chapter focuses on the history of case studies and begins with the Chicago school in the first decades of the twentieth century, where this methodological perspective first evolved. Analyzing that period, Sena concludes that the term was mainly used as a label associated with procedures of qualitative research—from life stories to in-depth interviews and participant observation, although methods were not always well-defined or made explicit in those early works.

With the decline of qualitative methods after the Second World War, the case study seems to have disappeared from the mainstream language of research only to reappear in the 1980s. However, on

its reappearance, the perspective of case studies followed two different paths. On the one hand, a group of sociologists recovered the original idea of the Chicago school and “tended to associate case studies with a type of qualitative research *tout court*” (p. 25). On the other hand, scholars from other disciplines, such as education, political science, or psychology, attempt to separate the case study from qualitative research and think of it as a specific methodological approach, such as Gerring and Yin. Considering the former group, Sena shows how the recovery of a generic idea of the case study did nothing to clarify its use. On the contrary, it added to the confusion. For Sena, the association with qualitative methods should be seen as a methodological affinity rather than a prescriptive definition. Considering the second group, the Author shows how, although they tried to clarify the objectives, procedures, and techniques of the case study, they did not always succeed in doing so effectively.

That dividing axis in the literature allows Sena to take a clear position: the identification of the case study with qualitative research should gradually be abandoned. Indeed, it would be more appropriate to consider a case study as a research approach able to overcome the dichotomy between qualitative and quantitative research.

In the third chapter, that issue is discussed in-depth. Among all the existing definitions and uses in the literature, Sena identifies a tendency to define case studies as an approach (neither method nor strategy). Here, she takes Creswell’s definition of research approach and applies it to case studies:

Research approaches are plans and the procedures for research that span the steps from broad assumptions to detailed methods of data collection, analysis, and in-

terpretation. This plan involves several decisions...The overall decision involves which approach should be used to study a topic. Informing this decision should be the philosophical assumptions the researcher brings to the study; procedures of inquiry (called research designs); and specific research methods of data collection, analysis, and interpretation. [p. 40]

This explanation is complemented in the same chapter by analyzing the notion of case, which has wide semantic versatility. Although cases are always studied referring to a unit or group of units around which data are collected and analyzed, this is not enough to deduce whether it can be the object of a case study. The specificity must be found elsewhere.

The fourth and fifth chapters look at specific guidelines for planning a case study with a wide and detailed reference to the main issues relative to why a case study should be conducted, introducing considerations concerning the research design (chapter 4) and how to conduct a case study (chapter 5).

The sixth chapter considers an aspect practically absent in the literature: what distinguished case study from other methodological approaches. Sena compares case studies with quantitative (especially surveys) and qualitative research. The Author establishes contrasts with life stories and ethnographic research. Then, she looks at the articulation of case studies with mixed methods.

The seventh chapter is dedicated to illustrating with examples specific fields where case studies have been used, both in research where the Author participated and in research on evaluation, a field where the perspective has been extensively used. The Author also discusses different sociological and socio-economic research, particularly those labeled

case studies, such as some of the seminal works by members of the Chicago school. According to Sena, those researches were inappropriately termed case studies because they did not start by identifying a concrete problem related to a well-defined case—they were simply examples of qualitative research in general.

Finally, the volume concludes by summarizing the principal arguments of each chapter.

In summary, the book represents a new contribution to the questions surrounding case studies, with the added virtue—the discussions unfold to bring order and clarity and not to confuse.

## References

Gerring, John. 2007. *Case Study Research: Principles and Practices*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Tight, Malcolm. 2010. "The Curious Case of Case Study: A Viewpoint." *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 13(4):329-339.

### Citation

Rausky, María Eugenia. 2024. "Book Review: Sena, Barbara. 2024. *The Case Study in Social Research. History, Methods, and Applications*. London, New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group." *Qualitative Sociology Review* 20(3):108-111. Retrieved Month, Year ([http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/archive\\_eng.php](http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/archive_eng.php)). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18778/1733-8077.20.3.06>