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Case Study

The individual has always been at the center of case study research. Driven by the desire to examine social reality and its inherent diversity, the researcher observed individual “actors” in their natural “surroundings.”¹ According to the *Encyclopedia of Case Study Research*, sociology was one of the first disciplines to use case study research strategy, and it thus freed scientists from their small offices and allowed them to immerse themselves in the real world. The center of this new approach was Chicago in the 1920s. Inspired by Wilhelm Dilthey’s and Georg H. Mead’s works on social relations, sociologists began to observe and examine specific social groups. Inspired by the texts of philosophers, researchers William Thomas and Florian Znaniecki published a pioneering case study devoted to Polish immigrants in the United States. *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, published in five volumes between 1918 and 1920, was based on letters exchanged between families from Poland and the United States and also included reports about the living conditions of immigrants.² Indeed, the history of case study has Polish roots.

The researchers Birgit Lang, Joy Damousi and Alison Lewis point to even earlier beginnings for the case study, defining this strategy as one of modernity’s crucial narrative forms and means of explanation.³ The British historian and philosopher John Forrester considers the years after 1850 to be the “golden age of case study,” mainly thanks to case writing, which was the fastest and the most popular form of writing in the time of crisis.⁴ It is hard to name a better example of global destabilization than the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, when all values were reevaluated and ontology as such, including history, narrative, language and the subject, was questioned.⁵ The lost and troubled individual sought new and stable ways of acquiring knowledge, discovering them only in the contact with a “case” (in the double sense of the word): (i) an accidental event and (ii) the specific, the individual and close to the subject’s life and experience. *Case* began to function as a lens through which it was easier to see the world.⁶

¹ *Case Study Research in Political Science*, [in:] *Encyclopedia of Case Study Research*, ed. A. J. Mills, G. Durepos, E. Wiebe, vol. 1, Thousand Oaks 2010, p. 110.

² *Chicago School*, [in:] *Encyclopedia of Case Study Research*, op. cit., p. 140.

³ B. Lang, J. Damousi, A. Lewis, *Introduction*, [in:] *A history of the case study. Sexology, psychoanalysis, literature*, Manchester 2017, p. 1.

⁴ J. Forrester, *Foreword*, [in:] *Case Studies and the Dissemination of Knowledge*, ed. J. Damousi, B. Lang, K. Sutton, New York 2015, p. IX.

⁵ See R. Sheppard, *The Problematics of European Modernism* [in:] *Theorizing Modernism* ed. S. Giles, New York 2004, pp. 1-51.

⁶ *Encyclopedia of Case Study Research* links the word case etymologically to a random / possible event that is also historically unique, see *Paradigmatic Cases*, [in:] *Encyclopedia...*, op. cit., p. 645. In *Oxford English Dictionary*, case may be defined as a situation of a particular type; a person suffering from a disease; a particular situation; a court case; a person who needs special treatment; a matter that is being officially investigated, see *Oxford English Dictionary. The definitive record of the English language*, Adam Mickiewicz University Library, [online]. [date of access May 6, 2020]. Available at <https://www-1oed-1com-1018678nj32b5.han.amu.edu.pl/>. Case, as a subject of case study, may also be defined in different ways. Robert K. Yin points out that “classical case studies usually define a single person as a case” but it can also be a group of people, an event, or a non-person. The researcher claims that each researcher should be able to define the type of case he/she is discussing independently, see R. K. Yin, *Case study research. Design and methods*, Thousand Oaks 1994, pp. 60-62.

In times of ethical relativism and the declining authority of the Church, only an external force, namely criminal law, exercised power over the moral life of a person. Respectively, a mysterious force acting from within, the human psyche, became the subject of interest of a new medical discipline: psychiatry (as well as psychology and sexology). Michael Foucault emphasizes that an individual, considered as a specific case, has unique features that distinguish him/her from others (as the result of experience) and, at the same time, like everyone else, is limited by gender and law. As the French philosopher wrote in *Discipline and Punish*, individuality is therefore, in fact, documentation and a set of codes (the physical code of signaling, the medical code of symptoms, the educational or military code of conduct and performance), which are transcribed by institutions in the process of “examination:”

The examination, surrounded by all its documentary techniques, makes each individual a ‘case:’ a case which at one and the same time constitutes an object for a branch of knowledge and a hold for a branch of power. The case is no longer, as in casuistry or jurisprudence, a set of circumstances defining an act and capable of modifying the application of a rule; it is the individual as he may be described, judged, measured, compared with others, in his very individuality; and it is also the individual who has to be trained or corrected, classified, normalized, excluded, etc.⁷

In 1996, Forrester engaged in a dialogue with Foucault in *If p, Then What? Thinking in Cases*. Forrester argues that the new teaching system introduced at Harvard Law School in the 1870s changed the perception of a case. It was no longer merely the derivation of law, but a key component in determining its development. The case method of teaching allowed students to experience real law, compare a given case with other cases and learn how to create a precedent. At the same time, students learned about what is the most important in the lawyer’s profession: the complexity of human life.⁸ Medical sciences have also adopted the new didactic method, moving away from “*ex cathedra*” teaching. Forrester argues that the anti-humanism of the 1960s, found in the works of Foucault or Jean Paul Sartre, should give way to a positive humanism and a new understanding of morality. It should not be based on the naive concept of universal goodness, but on a specific case and proof.⁹

However, it does not mean that Forrester does not agree with Foucault. Undoubtedly, at the turn of the century the tendency to dehumanize the individual, defined only in terms of case study, was strong. The individual became the subject of analysis, especially when he/she was alienated or considered asocial: as a homosexual, a criminal or a hysterical woman. In her book *Sexual Anarchy. Gender and Culture in the Fin de Siècle*, Elaine Showalter explains that the well-known case of Jack the Ripper could be linked to the desire to limit women’s independence by “scaring” them into staying at home. Today, we read the famous image of a naked prostitute with her intestines exposed as an accurate representation of how a woman was objectified in twofold manner: (i) seen only as the body, the silent woman was a *case* that could be studied, measured, and experimented on; at the same time, (ii) as a case (suitcase, container), the woman became an object that should be opened and analyzed.

⁷ M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, New York 1975, p. 191. The philosopher claims “the technology of power” was first developed in the 18th century.

⁸ See J. Forrester, *If p, Then What? Thinking in Cases*, “History of the Human Sciences” 1996, no. 3, vol. 9, pp. 15-16.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 20.

The woman-as-a-case was deprived of her individual experiences, which were nothing more than statistics quoted by male scientists in their works.¹⁰ In medical discourse, the desire to open the woman and discover her anatomic secrets led to the development of gynecology and even sex reassignment surgery. When the American gynecologist Marion Sims first used the speculum to examine the female body, he described himself as a “colonizer” and a “conqueror” who conquers a new, unknown territory.¹¹ The mystery of female anatomy, which is hidden behind the closed door of the body, has also been discussed in literature, as exemplified by the figure of the *femme fatale*.

The main goal of psychoanalysis, which emerged in the second half of the 19th century, was to understand the internal dynamics of the individual (not just women). Indeed, psychoanalysis was seen as a discipline which combined science, art, psychiatry and literature.¹² The latest discoveries in the fields of medicine, psychiatry, sexology and forensics were used by writers who created their own “case” literature; for example, inspired by unsolved detective and medical cases, Arthur Conan Doyle wrote *The Case of Lady Sannox* (1893) and the famous *Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes* (1927).¹³ Writers and theoreticians had been inspired by medicine much earlier, especially as regards naturalistic poetics. In his essay on the experimental novel, Emil Zola pointed to the direct reference source which was *L'Introduction à l'étude de la médecine expérimentale* (*Introduction to the study of experimental medicine*) by Claude Bernard. Zola stayed close to the letter of medical study, pointing out that in some cases, one only needed to change the word “medicine” and “novel” to move from the field of medicine to literary studies.¹⁴ Zola claims that the writer must assume the role of the impartial observer who draws inspiration from nature and the experimentalist who organizes experiences, i.e. “animates characters in the story” according to the principles determined by the studied phenomena.¹⁵ For Zola, description is the most important instrument of poetics, since the novel is nothing more than a “protocol of experience that the writer repeats before the eyes of the audience.”¹⁶

The features of the naturalistic novel correspond to the features of the case study. The writer, taking on the dual role of the observer and the experimentalist, describes what he sees, while classifying, organizing, and creating context. Similarly to a researcher, in addition to describing, the writer should also contextualize his research.¹⁷ Thick description in case study re-

¹⁰See E. Showalter, *The Woman's Case*, [in:] E. Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy. Gender and Culture in the Fin de Siècle*, New York 1990, pp. 127-134.

¹¹Ibidem, p. 129.

¹²B. Lang, J. Damousi, A. Lewis, op. cit., p. 10.

¹³Interestingly, the theorists of the modern novel of the early twentieth century, Mikhail Bakhtin and Erich Auerbach, were looking for an antidote to the uncompromising modernist prose which undermined the value of literature in earlier works that were more closely associated with realism and naturalism: Virginia Woolf's works were valued more than the works of the more radical James Joyce, while the prose of Thomas Mann and Alexander Pushkin was valued more than the prose of Robert Musil, see ibidem, p. 12.

¹⁴E. Zola, *The Experimental Novel*, New York 1964, pp. 178-179.

¹⁵Ibidem, p. 182.

¹⁶Ibidem, p. 183.

¹⁷According to the *Encyclopedia*: “Case study is not a separate method or tool isolated from the research context”, see *Case Study as a Methodological Approach*, [in:] *Encyclopedia...*, op. cit., p. 68. Bent Flyvbjerg argues that context-based knowledge is necessary to discuss intricate human affairs and at the same time it is necessary for the researcher's learning process; see B. Flyvbjerg, *Case Study*, [in:] *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln, 4th edition, Thousand Oaks 2011, p. 310.

search, first employed by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, is a scientific description which focuses on details in context.¹⁸ The attention to the nature of the described object, which is presented under the supervision of the observing and involved subject, characterizes both case study research and the naturalistic novel.

If one looks for a common denominator between the case study and the novel, one should pay attention to the narrative form.¹⁹ The sociologist Yiannis Gabriel begins his case study about Victor, the wild child from Aveyron, thus:

I am sitting in a friend's office in Berkeley, just prior to delivering a lecture. The topic of my lecture is nostalgia, an emotion that I cannot help but experience as I am revisiting my alma mater. I pick up a book from his library more or less at random and am interested to notice that the book refers to the case of Victor, the wild child of Aveyron. [...] But my fascination with the book increases dramatically when I notice on the book's first page the signature of Herbert Blumer, the book's original owner.²⁰

Gabriel's story ends where it began, at his office in Berkeley. The researcher thus creates a self-contained case study structure (using a framing device). Apart from description, storytelling is another tool used in case study research. Gabriel also points to the specific feature of the study, which is luck / the ability to discover something interesting by chance (serendipity).²¹ Interestingly, Zola also emphasizes the importance of spontaneous writing: the experimental idea is momentary, individual, and peculiar, which is a testament to the work's originality and the author's ingenuity.²² As the above example demonstrates, the researcher does not always speak from the distant, observational and objective position which Zola postulated in the naturalistic novel. According to case study theory, the researcher should be involved in the subject of his/her analysis; he/she should interact with it and use the "mutual trust" created in the process as a guarantee of its success.²³ Objectivity in a case study is not about creating universal principles, but about capturing the uniqueness of a given case and understanding it in the context of the environment in which it took place.²⁴

Storytelling and the researcher's involvement play an important role in the most famous case studies described by Sigmund Freud. Although case study, as Susan Wells points out, is not a literary genre, Freud's works have been and still are very popular; they are widely read and discussed and, in fact, belong to the modernist literary canon, with particular emphasis on

¹⁸See *Thick Description*, [in:] *Encyclopedia...*, p. 116. John Gerring also draws attention to the importance of descriptiveness of case study, pointing out that specific case studies are not so much problem-oriented as, above all, informative and cognitive. See J. Gerring, *What Is a Case Study and What Is It Good for?*, "The American Political Science Review" 2004, no. 2, vol. 98, p. 347.

¹⁹The German literary critic of the early 20th century André Jolles describes case study as an archetypal form of narrative. See B. Lang, J. Damousi, A. Lewis, *Introduction*, [in:] *A history of the case study...*, op. cit., p. 2.

²⁰See Y. Gabriel, *Case Studies as Narratives: Reflections Prompted by the Case of Victor, the Wild Child of Aveyron*, "Journal of Management Inquiry" 2017, no. 4, vol. 28, p. 403.

²¹*Ibidem*, p. 408.

²²E. Zola, op. cit., p. 183. The importance of researcher's intuition in case studies is also discussed by B. Flyvbjerg, op. cit., p. 308.

²³See *Case Study as a Methodological Approach*, [in:] *Encyclopedia...*, op. cit., p. 66.

²⁴*Ibidem*.

the cases of Dora, the Wolf Man, and the Rat Man.²⁵ Freud's relationship with the latter patient was so intense that the psychiatrist was referred to as the "captain." Elaine Showalter and Leigh Gilmore observe that in Dora's case study Freud creates a narrative that is focused on itself, which obscures the subject of the study: Ida Bauer's hysteria.²⁶ Thus, the case study almost becomes the researcher's autobiographical story.

Case study as a writing genre which draws on medicine, psychoanalysis, and forensics is based on a detailed description with a clear narrative structure. Sometimes, the voice of the author is clearly present in the narrative. However, case study in its original form was and still is regarded primarily as a research strategy. In his famous *Case study research. Design and methods* (the only monograph devoted to case study published in Polish), Robert K. Yin, an American sociologist, tries to explain to beginners how to properly conduct case studies. He clearly defines the case study as a holistic method that combines project management, data collection techniques and a unique analytical approach.²⁷ Respectively, Gerring refers to political science and indicates that case study primarily involves definition and not analysis of cases or creating causal models. Gerring also points out that although case study is one of the most commonly used research strategies, its methodological definition does not exist, mainly because it is "just" an analysis of a single phenomenon.²⁸ Drawing on Gerring, Flyvbjerg claims that the researcher does not make a methodological but a thematic choice; he/she decides to analyze a specific case.²⁹ Case study is still in a methodological vacuum: the method of conducting the study is not determined by a pre-defined strategy that would involve, as Yin argues, subsequent stages which guarantee its correctness. This strategy is defined by a given case, and a given case may be examined in many different ways: qualitatively, quantitatively, analytically, hermeneutically or using mixed methods. The choice of a given method does not determine whether we are dealing with case study; the scope of the case is crucial in that respect.³⁰

²⁵See S. Wells, *Freud's Rat Man and the Case Study: Genre in Three Keys*, "New Literary History" 2003, no. 2, vol. 34, p. 354. Wells discusses the narrative structure of Freud's cases: starting from a detailed description of therapeutic meetings with the patient, through an analytical summary, to generalizing conclusions. Freud is not the only medical writer who combines literary writing with professional experience; Oskar Panizza and Alfred Döblin also developed a new paradigm and new descriptive practice. In *Psychopatia criminalis* (1989), Panizza discusses fictional cases of real patients, parodying medical case studies. In turn, Döblin was inspired by events related to the social justice system, shocking crimes, especially involving sexual violence. Importantly, literature has also inspired medicine. The novel *Venus in furs* (1870) by Leopold von Sacher-Masoch aroused widespread controversy and triggered discussion among psychologists and psychiatrists about sexual deviations. Inspired by *Venus in Furs*, the German psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing published *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886), in which he classifies and lists 19th-century sexual deviations, such as homosexuality, fetishism, masochism, and sadism, thereby confirming the new status of the literary text as a source of medical data, see B. Lang, *The shifting case of masochism: Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's Venus im Pelz (1870)*, [in:] B. Lang, J. Damousi, A. Lewis, *A history of the case study*, op. cit., pp. 19-54.

²⁶See E. Showalter, op. cit., p. 137, see also A. Więckiewicz, *(Auto)analityczny opis przypadku. Wspomnienia Izydora Sadgera o Zygmuncie Freudzie*, "Poznańskie Studia Polonistyczne. Seria Literacka" 2019, no. 35 (55), p. 268.

²⁷R. K. Yin, *Case study research ...*, op. cit., p. 18. Yin defines a case study thus: "A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident." Hans Gerd-Ridder formulates a similar definition in: H. Gerd-Ridder, *The theory contribution of case study research designs*, "Business Research" 2017, no. 10, p. 282.

²⁸J. Gerring, op. cit., p. 341.

²⁹B. Flyvbjerg, op. cit., p. 301.

³⁰Ibidem.

Although, according to Gerring, case study has not been precisely defined, we may distinguish its specific features,³¹ including description and experience. In a case study, we are dealing with the experience of both the subject of the study (which is unique and peculiar, close to real life and current events) and the experience of the involved researcher who enters into the relationship with the subject he or she is analyzing. Described in detail but read as a coherent narrative, a case study may function not so much as a method, research strategy or approach, but, as Helen Simons argues, as a “story of the case.” The “story of the case” is not dominated by a specific method but is focused on the concrete case as such, its structure and context.³² Although the researcher is a decision-making person within the framework of the study, he/she cannot overshadow the subject of the description with his/her own superstitions and pre-judgments. In Polish literary studies, case study as “a story of the case” is employed by Tomasz Umerle in *Literackie praktyki codzienności. Teoria i studium przypadku* [Literary practices of everyday life. Theory and Case Study]. Umerle analyzes amateur writing of female high school students as a “literary practice of everyday life.”³³ Umerle draws on his own experience as a teacher and an academic in the study, but at the same time, thanks to description, he brings to the fore the teenagers’ novel *Ułomna logicznie* [Logically disabled], which he does not subject to excessive interpretation or strict literary categorization, providing only explanatory commentary.

Undoubtedly, the above example confirms that case study has become part of literary discourse in recent years. Ryszard Nycz first signaled it in “Teksty Drugie” in 2007, when he discussed the concept of anthropology of literature. Nycz explains that in an era of non-paradigms, when research methods are challenged, case study seems to be an adequate and productive approach, untainted by premature hypotheses and generalizations, with a clear focus on what is real, experimental, specific and individual.³⁴ For the Polish theoretician, as for Simons, the issue of experience is crucial: a case study is primarily a way of documenting the experience of the individual and his/her story.³⁵ However, unlike the American scholar, Nycz does not try to contain case study within one coherent, holistic story. On the contrary, he points out that individual case studies should be corrected by new ones and be part of a “complex open network.”³⁶ Nycz is also careful when it comes to referring to case study as a method. Instead, he talks about a makeshift method or a bricolage research strategy, pointing to the key issue that locates the idiographic tradition at the heart of this strategy. Description as part of the research poetics moderates theoretical impulses and the oppressive nature of interpretation. In an era when literature is no longer defined in terms of communication, description emphasizes its cognitive character. This shift from communication to cognition, and from interpretation to description, becomes the main goal of using case study research strategy.

³¹J. Gerring, *op. cit.*, p. 346.

³²H. Simons, *Case Study Research in Practice*, Thousand Oaks 2009, p. 5.

³³See T. Umerle, *Literackie praktyki codzienności. Teoria i studium przypadku*, Poznań 2018.

³⁴R. Nycz, *Antropologia literatury, kulturowa teoria literatury, poetyka doświadczenia*, “Teksty Drugie” 2007, no. 6, p. 45.

³⁵H. Simons, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

³⁶R. Nycz, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

In generic terms, as a text dealing with a specific phenomenon or an individual that functions as a narrative, case study dates back to modernist's patterns of dealing with reality and new phenomena (e.g. mental disorders). Literature and other disciplines, such as sociology, medicine, psychology, or sexology, have influenced one another – they have borrowed narrative forms from one another and built the foundations for transdisciplinary cooperation. Today, as Lang, Damousi, and Lewis point out, case study functions as a nomadic genre (or a quasi-genre); it is somewhat vague and does not belong to a single specific discipline³⁷ (although it is undoubtedly worth noting that the crime novel could be considered a continuation of the literary case study today). As a research method (or a quasi-research method), case study, after a period of stagnation, is again achieving a high position in medical research, especially as regards the analysis of complex cases.³⁸ On the other hand, case study research finds new applications in literature as a result of the anthropological turn.³⁹ In this context, attention should be paid to the ontology of the literary text. Although it interacts with the researcher, the text wishes to be read and interpreted on its own. Cognitive description is an adequate mediating strategy that enables both the researcher who conducts the study and future scholars to rediscover literature, not so much as the subject of research, but, as Nycz points out, as a guide.⁴⁰

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

³⁷B. Lang, J. Damousi, A. Lewis, *Conclusion*, [in:] *A History of the Case Study...*, op. cit., p. 127.

³⁸*Ibidem*.

³⁹However, that is not to say that case study as not so much a research strategy, but a creative method, has not appeared before in the form of naturalistic and realistic poetics.

⁴⁰R. Nycz, p. 47.

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KEYWORDS

case study

ABSTRACT:

The article discusses case study with a focus on the history of the term and its transdisciplinary application, from medicine and sociology, through law, psychiatry, psychology, sexology, and literary studies. The author discusses the differences between case study as a genre (Brigit Lang, Joy Damousi, Alison Lewis, Yiannis Gabriel) and case study as a research strategy (Bent Flyvbjerg, Gerring John, Ryszard Nycz), which has been recently also employed in literary studies. Determining the scope and features of case study is accompanied by an analysis of description as a key tool in formulating “the story of the case.”

research method

DESCRIPTION

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Izabela Sobczak - a PhD student in literature at the Adam Mickiewicz University Doctoral School. In 2019, she defended her master's thesis *Identity and intertextuality in Alison Bechdel's Fun Home* at the Faculty of Polish and Classical Philology. Her research interests include modernist literature, contemporary women's literature, literary studies and theory of translation. She published in "Prace Literaturoznawcze," "Forum of Poetics," "Rocznik Komparatystyczny" and "Guliwer. Czasopismo o książce dla dziecka." |