Case-study Method in Psychology and Related Disciplines

D.B. Bromley

THE CASE-STUDY METHOD IN PSYCHOLOGY AND RELATED DISCIPLINES

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Preface

The individual case-study or situation-analysis is the bedrock of scientific investigation. This may sound like an extravagant claim. I hope to justify it by reference to the pervasiveness of the case-study method in scientific and professional work in many different areas including the natural sciences. Case-studies can be found in areas as disparate as: administration, anatomy, anthropology, artificial intelligence, biochemistry, business studies, clinical medicine, counselling, criminology, education, gerontology, history, industrial relations, jurisprudence, management, military studies, personality, politics, psychiatry, social work, and sociology. A basic logic or methodology underlies case-studies in these diverse areas. A particular set of events and relationships is identified. This 'case' is then described, analysed, interpreted, and evaluated within a framework of ideas and procedures appropriate to cases of that sort. Our main concern is with the framework of ideas and procedures appropriate to case-studies in psychology, but reference to the use of case-method in related disciplines is helpful in elucidating its scientific character and its role in professional work.

The term 'case-study' means different things to different people. To the psychologist it means the study of an individual person, usually in a problematic situation, over a relatively short period of time. A psychological case-study is a segment of a life-history. To the social worker it means the study of a unique social situation involving one or more people—a delinquent boy, a family in distress, a marital breakdown. To the anthropologist it can mean the study of an individual person or the study of a group of people or the analysis of a social situation or process. To the psychiatrist it usually means the clinical study of a person with a mental illness. In business and industrial studies it can mean the investigation of a particular firm, an industrial dispute, a major accident. In these and other areas generally politics, military science, espionage, criminal investigation—it means the study of a major incident or event which is interesting in its own right. The event may be interesting because examination reveals useful information or because it can be used as a 'model' example for teaching or research purposes. Model cases are prototypical instances of the class of phenomena elections, battles, propaganda, crimes, accidents, strikes, or whatever—to which they belong.

It is obvious, therefore, that the term 'case-study' refers to a class of investigations far wider than the *psychological* study of individual cases. In

certain areas—business studies for example—there are fairly well-worked-out procedures for carrying out case-studies and making decisions. In other areas, for example clinical medicine, there are standard procedures for diagnosis and treatment. In other areas, however, such as psychology, social work, sociology, and anthropology, there is considerable variation in purpose and procedure.

Across all the areas mentioned it is possible to discern a common logic—the logic of scientific method. It is the purpose of this book to demonstrate the logic of the individual case-study with special reference to the psychological study of individual persons. The book is amply illustrated with case-materials. These have been selected not because they represent rare or particularly interesting cases but because they can be understood without formal training in the special concepts, methods, and procedures of the human sciences—psychology, psychiatry, sociology, and so on.

One aim of the book is to ease the transition from lay to professional levels of competence in understanding and dealing with people who need help. A related aim is to improve the reader's ability to understand and deal with people in daily life, even if that means, as it sometimes does, recognizing that one's understanding of, and capacity to influence, a particular person is sometimes embarrassingly poor.

I hope that people in business and industrial studies will recognize how the concepts and methods that they are familiar with have been applied to the psychological study of individual persons. At the same time, I hope they will appreciate the relevance to business and industrial studies of other concepts and methods with which they may be much less familiar. There is, of course, a direct relationship between the psychological study of individual persons and the wide spectrum of case-studies referred to above. This relationship arises from the fact that in most of these 'extended case-studies' or 'situation analyses' it is essential to understand the behaviour of the persons involved in the case. The psychological study of individual cases is the study of persons in situations.

The preoccupation of academic psychologists with experimental and psychometric approaches to the study of personality and adjustment has meant that the case-study approach has been seriously neglected. The neglect has been aggravated by the identification of the case-method with psychodynamic psychology and with social work, where there appears to have been no success in developing a *scientifically* acceptable framework for understanding and dealing with individual cases. In many areas of sociology, too, the case-method has been virtually abandoned in favour of quantitative survey methods.

There are two further reasons why case-methods are not prominent in scientific work. One is that they deal with private matters and can usually be reported only with the permission of the person(s) concerned or if suitably modified to avoid identification. The other is that there is no general agreement on the content or organization of a case-study or on the procedure

to be employed in carrying it out. I shall describe a general-purpose procedure for studying 'persons in situations'. It has all the essential features of a *scientific* procedure. It provides a descriptive account of the relevant facts; it provides a way of organizing this information in a meaningful way; it shows how a particular case-study investigation can be pursued constructively and creatively; it also shows how a case-study can be evaluated critically and in detail. The proposed general-purpose procedure explores possibilities for predicting outcomes, and for forecasting the behaviour of individuals for the purposes of intervention and evaluation. The aim of the book, therefore, is to provide professional workers and intelligent lay people with scientific concepts and methods that will help them to understand individuals who need their advice and help.

Teachers in the social and behavioural sciences, and in professional areas such as management, health, education, and welfare, should find the book useful in relation to case-studies in their particular areas of interest. Classroom case-studies and real-life case-studies can be used in professional training and in academic education. They can become the focus for reports, discussions, simulations, films, and other sorts of presentation.

Case-material has too often been used simply to illustrate or to add 'human interest' to an otherwise rather dry account of a social policy, housing problem, psychological treatment, or medical condition. It is my belief, however, that the study of individual cases and situations poses a methodological problem of special, maybe even basic, importance in the social and behavioural sciences. It has been said, with regard to the natural sciences, that 'Science is not concerned with the individual case'. This is because the natural sciences deal with phenomena which are susceptible to close control and quantitative analysis, and can be conceptualized by means of highly abstract and general laws. Under these laws, individual instances occur in regular predictable ways. The social and behavioural sciences, on the other hand, deal with phenomena of more complex sorts, much less susceptible to control, quantification, and formal logical analysis. The applied sciences engineering, agriculture, and so on—work within an abstract, general framework of natural science and mathematics but must be concerned with individual projects—particular bridges, aeroplanes, crops, and pesticides. Similarly, the social and behavioural sciences, as yet lacking satisfactory large-scale abstract and general concepts, must be concerned with the individual human beings and social organizations that constitute their ultimate subject-matter.

Where human nature is concerned, the separation of basic and applied science may be self-defeating in the sense that the most important and interesting aspects of human nature are so context-dependent that abstraction and generalization are severely limited. The value of the case-study approach is that it deals directly with the individual case in its actual context. At the same time, it carries implications about the extent to which the resulting analysis is applicable to other similar cases. Thus, rather than working from

the top down, as it were, from abstract theory to individual instance or particular rule, the case-method in psychology works from the bottom up, from the analysis of particular cases—persons in situations—to 'types' of case (cases of greater generality) through the development of 'case-law'. Developing case-law can be every bit as demanding and as rigorous as developing scientific law, even if it is not quantitative or experimental. This important philosophical issue is dealt with in more detail in Chapter 11. It is raised here briefly so that readers may be aware that case-studies and situation-analyses are fundamental to scientific progress. Learning how to carry out and how to evaluate case-studies should help to develop a student's appreciation of scientific method. Studying cases and analysing situations gives practice in solving problems and making decisions or recommendations.

In psychology, the term methodology generally refers to experimental design and statistical analysis. In sociology it refers to survey technique, participant observation, archival analysis, and so on. It seems to me that the quasi-judicial case-study constitutes a crucial but seriously neglected method of inquiry in the social sciences. This book is an attempt to demonstrate its fundamental importance in philosophy of science terms and to provide a practical guide to those who wish to study individual cases in a professional and scientific way.

In a classroom setting, of course, cases and situations can be contrived to fulfil educational objectives. Even a real-life case or situation can be put to educational use, provided this does not interfere with the health and welfare of the person(s) involved. The book has been written with both teachers and students in mind. The cases and situations I have used to illustrate and explain the method necessarily provide only a small and selective set. They are relatively simple, although diverse in character. This should enable students to see how the method applies to the sorts of cases and situations they encounter or hear about in training or in daily life. Teachers usually have access to case-materials of a more complex or technical sort; but there are aspects of even these cases that students can deal with in terms of everyday experience. The approach adopted is systematic and fairly detailed. Its full scope will be appreciated only if each and every chapter is worked through.

With the benefit of hindsight, this book can be regarded as the third part of a trilogy. The first was entitled *Person Perception in Childhood and Adolesc-ence*, a co-authored work by Livesley and Bromley (1973). It dealt with the development of self-understanding and understanding others during the school-age years. The second was entitled *Personality Description in Ordinary Language* (Bromley, 1977). This book revised and condensed the developmental aspects described in the first volume and looked in detail at the forms of language used by ordinary adults when they described themselves and other people. That book tried to show what sorts of information are contained in self-descriptions and descriptions of other people, how this information is organized, and how it might be used in personal adjustment and in our dealings with other people. Its main emphases were on common-

sense or 'lay' forms of understanding and ordinary language. The present volume, however, deals with the higher levels of professional competence and scientific understanding in the psychological study of individual cases.

In Chapter 1 I have restated some of the ideas contained in the chapter on the psychological case-study in Bromley (1977). There is a great deal of other material in that book, however, which some readers may find relevant and useful—particularly material on content analysis, personal adjustment, and characterization in fiction. Chapter 1 thus provides a convenient platform from which to launch a more substantial account of the case-study method in psychology and related disciplines.

In concentrating on the scientific methodology and the higher professional purposes of psychological case-studies, we must not neglect the fact that case-studies are sometimes carried out in a sloppy, perfunctory, and incompetent manner and sometimes even in a corrupt, dishonest way. Case-studies provide opportunities for people to defend and further their own interests regardless of the truth and fair play. Higher standards of scientific understanding and professional practice in case-studies of all kinds and at all levels should contribute to higher standards of moral conduct—through example and critical, intelligent, informed appraisal.

A grasp of the developmental processes in self-understanding and understanding others in the juvenile period is desirable but not essential to appreciating the complexities of adult social cognition, and the further complexities of scientific and professional levels of understanding human behaviour. The transition to scientific and professional work with individual cases cannot be achieved without specialized training which includes, as part of its specialism, an appreciation of the need to work rationally and empirically, i.e. scientifically, and to be constantly trying to evaluate and improve one's theories, methods, and practices against the best possible evidence of their effectiveness and desirability.

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CHAPTER ONE

Psychological Case-Studies and the Quasi-Judicial Method

What is a Psychological Case-study? Glossary Brief Historical Background A Note on the Case-study Method in Education Basic Rules for Psychological Case-studies Procedural Steps in the Quasi-judicial Method The Contents and Organization of a Case-study Final Checks Further Points of General Interest Summary and Conclusions

WHAT IS A PSYCHOLOGICAL CASE-STUDY?

A psychological case-study is an account of a person in a situation. Of course, there is usually something interesting or problematical about the person, the situation, or the relationship between them. The account can take many different forms. It can take the form of a summary statement in ordinary language, a detailed technical report containing scientific and professional concepts and data, a judicial or quasi-judicial report, a computerized catalogue of information, a documentary film, and so on. We are concerned with the sorts of case-studies that fall into one or the other of the first three forms. A case-study need not necessarily be concerned with a deviant or difficult person or with an unusual situation. For training purposes it might be better to begin by studying cases involving ordinary people in relatively normal circumstances—coping with their job or their family, organizing their finances or leisure time, moving house, or whatever.

A case-study usually deals with a relatively short, self-contained episode or segment of a person's life. The episode is usually important in that it is formative, critical, or culminant—the sort of episode one would regard as a life-event worth mentioning in a life-history. A case-study can be regarded as a close view of one important life-event. A life-history, by contrast, is more like a series of such episodes viewed less closely but in relation to each

other—see Runyan (1982a). Both case-studies and life-histories usually incorporate not only a narrative account of the person's actions, experiences, personal qualities, and circumstances but also a causal analysis which attempts to explain the facts and events described. This chapter describes how a 'quasi-judicial' non-experimental method can be used to investigate individual cases.

The usual purpose of a case-study is to find a solution to the person's problem. This often means making an analysis without having all the information one would like, and arranging for some course of action to be taken, the outcome of which is uncertain. Ideally, the course of action taken should be followed up to evaluate its effectiveness. Case-studies may have other purposes. They can be used to demonstrate 'typical' or 'representative' states of affairs or to illustrate a range of phenomena. For example, case-studies can be used to demonstrate a psychological condition such as anxiety or to illustrate different sorts of reaction to stress.

Case-studies can be carried out at various levels of complexity—from a single, brief, trivial episode to a lengthy major life-event with multiple strands. The term 'case-study' is used to refer not only to the psychological study of individual persons (our main focus of interest) but also to business-study cases of commercial, industrial, and other organizations faced with problems in marketing, manufacturing, or industrial relations—see Easton (1982). Yin (1984) has reviewed the case-study method as a research strategy in public administration and the social sciences generally.

The term 'case-study' can also refer very generally to any singular case or example or incident, the description and analysis of which is thought to contribute to our understanding of an area of inquiry—an accident or near-accident in transport studies, a patient in medical and nursing studies, an organization in management studies, a cultural event or artifact in anthropological studies, a battle in military studies, the production of a textbook in commercial publishing, and so on. The essential and common feature of all these different sorts of case is that they are singular, naturally occurring events in the real world. They are not experimentally contrived events or simulations. It is important to realize, however, that even individual experiments, simulations, and surveys are themselves 'cases' in this general sense provided they are studied as real-world events in their wider context; see Miller et al. (1980), for example.

As we shall see, case-studies can be described and explained by reference to appropriate sorts of evidence and reasoning. Moreover, such cases do not exist in isolation. Within a given field of inquiry there may be family resemblances between different cases. By comparing and contrasting cases, a kind of 'case-law' can be developed. Case-law provides rules, generalizations, and categories which gradually systematize the knowledge (facts and theories) gained from the intensive study of individual cases.

Case-law (theory, in effect) emerges through a process of conceptual refinement as successive cases are considered in relation to each other. There

comes a time when the developing conceptual framework seems to impose a satisfactory pattern of meaning, such that consideration of subsequent cases adds little or nothing to the analysis. The cases within a category are exemplified by 'prototypical instances' although the category may contain less good examples (analogous, perhaps, to outliers in a statistical distribution). The main point, however, is that the case-laws (conceptual frameworks) arrived at are in no way dependent upon prior considerations regarding representative sampling from a demographically defined population. That is a different approach to a different problem. The proper comparison is with the emergence of case-law in jurisprudence.

There also emerges a kind of procedural framework which prescribes norms and standards for conducting case-studies of a given sort. The value of a case-study depends on the extent to which it reveals facts and relationships which make that particular case explicable, and at the same time adds to the 'case-law' in that general area of interest. Consider, for example, the cases, the procedural frameworks, and the 'case-law' associated with marital counselling, tax evasion, or communicable disease.

A psychological case-study is essentially a reconstruction and interpretation of a major episode in a person's life—see Bromley (1977). It is a reconstruction to the extent that the facts have to be established through what is in part an exercise in historical research, although it may not be recognized as such. It is an interpretation in the quasi-judicial sense of having to arrive at a verdict (a conclusion, solution, decision, or recommendation) on the basis of a rational argument about the relevant evidence. Clearly, it is possible for the facts to be badly reconstructed and/or for this evidence to be misinterpreted.

A case-study is not exhaustive in its description and analysis of the person and situation; it is selective in the sense that it addresses itself to some issues and ignores others. Thus some facts about the person and the situation are relevant to those issues (and so constitute evidence), whereas others are not.

There is no standard way of conducting psychological case-studies since they vary so much in so many ways. This does not exclude a measure of standardization, however, as regards content, organization, procedure, presentation, and so on, within any well-defined field of inquiry, such as parole board cases, management selection, rehousing, neuropsychological assessment, accident investigation, or adoption.

A psychological case-study is an account of how and why a person behaved as he or she did in a given situation. It is usual for case-studies to include a certain amount of life-history information which is remote (distal) from the situation or event in question. Care should be taken, however, not to let life-history information bias one's assessment of the immediate (proximate) causes of the Subject's behaviour. Similar care is taken to avoid bias arising from 'similar facts' in a judicial inquiry.

Case-studies are often carried out so that a desirable course of action can be implemented, whether in the interests of the Subject, or the Investigator(s), or the wider community, e.g. putting someone on probation, seeking divorce,

recommending surgery. In order to arrive at a decision about the best course of action to take, one needs to estimate the likelihood of achieving a desired outcome, and the costs and benefits of implementing the associated course of action. This can be effective only if the problems which gave rise to the case have been adequately defined, and the requisite solutions formulated. These topics are taken up in detail in later chapters.

Case-studies are always carried out in a context, and the context helps to determine the procedure and the end-result. Case-studies carried out by students as class exercises are different from case-studies carried out routinely in an organization for the purpose of promotion or performance appraisal, and these are different again from case-studies of one-man businesses carried out by an academic researcher, or 'human interest' stories produced by a journalist—see Wilby (1980), and Jennings (1981).

A psychological case-study calls for a set of observations on one person, together with some kind of commentary on the significance of those observations. Consider, for example, a series of reports of a child's behaviour which are interpreted in terms of the child's developing understanding of other people and interaction with them—see Wolf (1982). In case-studies of this kind the focus of the inquiry is narrow—rather like many medical case-studies—and the study may be systematic because of the existence of a clear conceptual framework within which the data can be organized and interpreted. Consider, in this connection, Piagetian and Freudian case-studies.

Shore (1984) presents a 'case-study' of a former transsexual. It covers several years of the person's life apart from brief consideration of his life-history background. The case is interesting in so far as it illustrates the complexities that arise from numerous contextual factors, shifts in the focal problem, and multiple explanations of the events, described in a mainly narrative account.

The boundaries of a case-study are arbitrary in the sense that it is up to the Investigator(s) to define the issues and terms of reference. A case-study which, for one Investigator, concerns the rehabilitation of a particular drug addict, for another concerns a particular neighbourhood where narcotics are available.

Clark and Penycate (1976) provide a semi-popular account of the case of Patrick Mackay—a psychopath convicted for several murders and other offences. This 'case', however, is really a 'life-history' and starts, in fact, with a brief life-story of Patrick Mackay's father as it overlapped with the story of his childhood. As with many cases which make newspaper headlines and find their way into popular publication, the case of Patrick Mackay emphasizes the unsatisfactory circumstances and errors of judgment that contributed to what, with the benefit of hindsight (see Chapter 10), looked like preventable crimes. The case of Patrick Mackay is mostly narrative history interspersed with brief comments on the associated persons and events. No claim is made to explain Mackay's behaviour except briefly in terms of inherited disposition and unsatisfactory upbringing.