

Susann Wagenknecht\*, Jessica Pflüger\*

# Making Cases: On the Processuality of Casings in Social Research

## Making Cases: Über die Prozessualität des Casings in der Sozialforschung

<https://doi.org/10.1515/zfsoz-2018-0119>

**Abstract:** What is the ‘case’ in case study research? Venturing beyond textbook explications of *case* as a technical term, we conceive the (re-)construction of cases as a continuous activity that we refer to as *casing*. In this paper, we focus on the role of casing in research processes, analyzing how, when, and why researchers invoke cases. Answering these questions affords a pragmatic understanding of what cases, and casings, actually are (and are good for). Re-reading two classic case studies, we distinguish different approaches of casing—*theoretically guided casing* and *empirically guided casing*—and propose a notion of casing that foregrounds the processual character of social scientific research, thereby making a methodological contribution to current discussions of *processuality in social theory* and discussions of *theorizing as a process*.

**Keywords:** Case Study; Casing; Case Definition; Qualitative Methods; Methodology; Processual Sociology; Social Process.

**Zusammenfassung:** Was ist der ‚Fall‘ in empirischen Fallstudien? Jenseits gebräuchlicher Handbuchdefinitionen schlagen wir vor, die (Re-)Konstruktion von Fällen als eine kontinuierliche Anstrengung zu verstehen und als *casing* zu charakterisieren. In diesem Beitrag heben wir die Rolle von *casings* für den Forschungsprozess hervor und fragen, wie, wann und warum in sozialwissenschaftlicher Forschung ‚gefällt‘ wird—Fragen, die ein pragmatisches Verständnis davon eröffnen, was Fälle und *casings* eigent-

lich sind und was sie leisten können. Anhand einer Diskussion zweier klassischer Fallstudien unterscheiden wir zwei Formen des *casings* (theoretisch vs. empirisch geleitetes *casing*) und stellen ein prozessuales Fallverständnis vor, das den gegenwärtigen Diskurs über ‚Prozessuale Soziologie‘ und ‚sozialwissenschaftliches Theoretisieren‘ methodologisch komplementieren möchte.

**Schlüsselwörter:** Fallstudien; Casing; Falldefinition; Qualitative Methoden; Methodologie; prozessuale Soziologie; soziale Prozesse.

## 1 Introduction

Over recent years, processuality has been emerging as a generative theme in social theory. A *Processual Sociology* adopts change as its paradigm and regards stability as being in need of explanation (cf. Abbott 2016: 2). Processual approaches do not deny the existence of social entities, but they do focus on how such entities develop, viewing the social as an inherently dynamic process (e. g., Abbott 1988, 2001, 2004; Miebach 2009; Schützeichel & Jordan 2015a). When recognizing the crucial role of temporality for social phenomena and their explanation, however, processual approaches face a number of *challenges* concerning empirical research practice and methodology (Vollmer 2015: 312; Aljets & Hoebel 2017: 7): How can processual approaches venture beyond easily recognizable, time-bound events (tensions, conflicts, alliances) and grasp the processes that underlie them, explicating that which remains tacitly in the background (cf. Hirschauer 2001)? Do processual methods place specific requirements upon time-sensitive data collection, analysis and presentation? And how could these requirements be met in practice? If, as Hella Dietz (2015) argues, processual approaches are forced to pay particular attention to the narrative structures of their theorizing, how should efforts to forge time-sensitive narratives be embedded in the research process?

In this paper, we suggest that recasting ‘the case’ (a prevalent, yet taken-for-granted concept of the social

\*Corresponding authors: Susann Wagenknecht, Fakultät I, Seminar für Sozialwissenschaften, Universität Siegen, Adolf-Reichwein-Str. 2, 57068 Siegen, Email: susann.wagenknecht@uni-siegen.de, URL: [https://www.uni-siegen.de/phil/sozialwissenschaften/soziologie/mitarbeiter/wagenknecht\\_susann/](https://www.uni-siegen.de/phil/sozialwissenschaften/soziologie/mitarbeiter/wagenknecht_susann/)

Jessica Pflüger, Fakultät für Sozialwissenschaft, Ruhr-Universität Bochum, Universitätsstraße 150, 44801 Bochum, E-mail: jessica.pflueger@rub.de, URL: <https://www.methoden.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/qualitative-methoden-der-sozialwissenschaft/team/prof-dr-jessica-pflueger.html>

sciences) in temporal terms helps addressing some of these challenges. We argue that a notion of *casing*, buttressed by a perspective that recognizes the construction of cases as ongoing and tentative throughout the whole research process, can serve as methodological vehicle for crafting processual sociologies. Casing, we contend, complements recent efforts to develop time- and process-sensitive methodologies (e. g., Baur & Ernst 2011; Schützeichel 2011) with a perspective sensitive towards the open-endedness of social processes. In this manner, a discussion of casing contributes to recent debates about the processual character of *knowledge production* (e. g., Camic et al. 2011, Leahey 2008) and *theorizing*—the process of developing theories—in the social sciences (Swedberg 2014a; Swedberg 2016; Farzin & Laux 2016). Both debates indicate a growing interest in the practices in which social science research is accomplished, paying particular attention to the temporality and dynamics of ‘doing social sciences’.

With the notion of casing outlined in this paper, we propose an account of *how*, *when* and *why* cases are adopted, consolidated, and modified (as well as abandoned) during research processes. We pursue these questions in a comparative analysis of two classic qualitative case studies, William Foote Whyte’s *Street Corner Society* (1993/1943) and Howard Becker et al.’s *Boys in White* (1992/1961). We show that, although both studies distinguish themselves by presenting a detailed account of their research process and offer a great deal of methodological detail, it is hard to determine what exactly their cases are – too ambiguous, too manifold, too dynamic are the case constructions they actually make use of. On the basis of our analysis, we highlight the provisional and shifting character of the casings we identify in *Street Corner Society* and *Boys in White*. Moreover, when tracing the bounding and de-bounding of cases during research processes, we discern two distinct *approaches* to casing, shaped by distinct analytic concerns, which we will describe as *theoretically guided* and *empirically guided casing*.

To make our argument, we proceed as follows: In Section 2 we first review conventional textbook advice on how to deal with cases in social science research; then we address Ragin’s (1992a, 2009) notion of casing by way of an alternative perspective. With *casing* we seek to convey the argument that cases are neither purely empirical nor theoretical units but a *highly dynamic social scientific activity*—cases are made (and re-made) in research processes. In Section 3 we provide an analysis of two well-known case studies and their casings, *Street Corner Society* and *Boys in White*. In our analysis, we identify different approaches of casing: *empirically guided casing*, which is led primarily by empirical sensitivity, and *theoretically*

*guided casing*, which is shaped largely by a commitment to existing theory and/or aspirations of theory building. In Section 4 we discuss the studies’ case constructions, their casing *approaches*, and *modes of theorizing*. Although the described casing strategies differ significantly, they both reveal that case constructions are fluid and (to some degree) open-ended. In Section 5 we conclude this paper with some reflections on the contribution that our account of casing makes to processual approaches in sociology and debates on theorizing as a process. We contend that the notion of casing offers a way of addressing (maybe even exploring) the mesh of intricate temporalities between the processuality of studied social phenomena and the processuality of research processes – *a perspective which complements existing approaches*. Yet acknowledging the processuality of research, and of casings in particular, in our view, ultimately poses the need to revise, or at least qualify, textbook advice on how to conduct case studies.

## 2 Cases and Casings

While ‘the case’ is a bread-and-butter concept of social science methodology, there is strikingly little reflection on what cases actually are (cf. Ragin & Becker 1992). Moreover, notions of case are employed in different research approaches in utterly diverse ways. While some textbooks treat cases as equivalent to *research units* (e. g., Gerring 2004; Yin 2014), other approaches regard cases as rather *fluid concepts* that need to be constructed in the research process (e. g., Ragin 1992a; see below). Depending upon the approach, cases can be formulated as *generic* or *specific*, understood as *empirical objects* or *theoretical constructs*; they can be *objects* or *conventions*, understood as either *found* or *made* (Ragin 1992b: 7 f.; see also Ragin’s conceptual map for answers to ‘What is a case?’, 1992b: 9).

What concrete cases actually denote in the context of specific pieces of research varies widely as well. Cases may consist of individual people, groups, events, processes, organizations, or institutions (cf. Thomas 2011: 23). Even early social science case studies offer a stunning diversity of case constructions. Whereas some studies make an individual person their case (e. g., Shaw 1930), other studies resort to more complex case constructions in which they conceive of their cases as social phenomena such as immigrant groups (e. g., Thomas & Znaniecki 1918–1920), a community (e. g., Zorbaugh 1983/1929), urban nightlife (e. g., Cressey 2008/1932), organizations (e. g., Blau 1972/1955; Selznick 1949), or union democracy (e. g., Lipset et al. 1956). Similarly, we find diverse case