

Researching Political Tourists: A Case Study Approach

Fabian Frenzel, Lecturer, Bristol Business School
University of the West of England, Bristol,
FabianFrenzel@uwe.ac.uk

Introduction

In this article I present the research methodology I used in my PhD research. I conducted a case study to examine political tourists within a framework of participant action research (PAR). Here I explain my choice of this approach in the light of some of the major critiques voiced against case studies. Some critics suggest that findings from case studies don't allow generalising statements. I also discuss critical questions regarding the role of bias and ethics involved in using case-studies. While these two latter ones are general concerns with research, they play a central role in the field researched here. The role of PAR in the case study is critical to this argument. I explain how I relate to the field and how this relation both enables a unique perspective but also involves co-research with the research participants.

The Case Study Approach

I chose a case study approach to my PhD because it was the best way to address my research objectives. I wanted to generate hypotheses and theory, yet at the same time better understand particular empirical phenomena. The case study is a research approach that enables both (Becker & Ragin, 2005; Yin, 1984; Flyvbjerg, 2006). My research concerns the field of political tourism, particularly certain forms of political tourism like protest camping and solidarity travel. These areas have been discussed mostly from the perspective of social movement studies and political science. The novelty of my approach was to discuss them from the perspective of tourism. The field that emerges here necessitates both empirical data collection for the particular cases and the formation of hypotheses and theory.

According to Yin the case study is

"an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context, when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident and in which multiple sources of evidence are used"

[1984, p.23].

Underlying the study of phenomena in relation to their context are research philosophies that are critical of positivism. There are a variety of methodologies derived from this philosophy, like hermeneutics, phenomenology or critical realism. I chose the case study approach because it does not demand subscription to a particular methodological paradigm, but remains highly pragmatic. As much as the case

study approach is a methodological choice it also operates as a flexible way of data collection which is open to the use of a variety of methods and to a wide range of interpretative attempts (Lamnek, 2005). The case study approach was thus preferred over other methodologies because 1) it supported a research philosophy critical of positivism, 2) it allowed for empirical research of particular phenomenon and the generation of theory necessitated by the exploration of a novel field and 3) it enabled the pragmatic use of a variety of methods of data collection.

Generalisability

There are various problems with case study approaches in general and with their application in this study in particular. The main critique voiced against case study approaches concerns the limited ability to generalise from individual or multiple cases (Campbell et al, 1966; Abercrombie et al, 1984). This critique comes from a positivist perspective insofar as it presupposes the superiority of theories that are removed from context. However, the importance of context to theorisation is arguably paramount. Flyvbjerg (2006) points out the central role of individual cases even in the natural sciences. Here they enable both the falsification of existing theories and the generation of new ones. Flyvbjerg refers to Popper's (1968) example of the case of one 'black swan' as a way of falsification of the theory that all swans are white. Flyvbjerg (2006, p.228) argues:

"The case study is well suited for identifying 'black swans' because of its in depth approach: What appears to be 'white' often turns out on closer examination to be 'black'."

Walton (2005) confirms this and points out that the potential of the case study to produce significant examples makes it central to the development of hypotheses and theory. He claims that 'case studies are likely to produce the best theory' (Walton, 2005, p.129). Flyvbjerg (2006, p.242) concludes, in reference to Kuhn, (1996) that a discipline without a large number of case studies is lacking the systematic production of examples. Without examples theorising would be "ineffective". There is then a case for a stronger application of case studies in the social sciences as a way to produce knowledge (Rosch, 1978; Ragin, 1992; Flyvbjerg, 2006).

A second critique voiced in regards of case studies is part of a more general critique of qualitative research and is particularly important in this case.

Bias

Case study approaches have been criticised for their bias towards the affirmation of the researcher's presumptions, therefore limiting the validity of the research (Ragin, 1992; Flyvbjerg, 2006). However, Geertz (1995, p.119) understands the field as a 'disciplinary force' that demands accuracy and care from the researcher. In my study this role of 'the field' was exercised by the controlling, enhancing and ultimately profiting 'political tourists' that were the participants to my research. I pursued the case study in the tradition of participatory action research (PAR) (Kindon et al, 2007). In PAR the researcher is not only participating passively in the practices that are researched, but takes active part in them. The participants share the researchers concern with the activities, also search for ways to improve the practices and approve of the conducted research in a knowledgeable way. In this sense the research is conducted as co-research between the different participants. PAR furthermore focuses on the activities and actions and tries to improve practices, monitor their adaptation after research and reflect further (Dick, 2002; McNiff, 2002; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; Reason & Bradbury, 2008). I found this approach very useful, because it enabled me to study interactively and in co-operation with the research participants, enhancing reliability and validity of the results in reflective exchanges. The political tourists I researched were practically involved in the research process in all stages. A third problem revolves around ethical issues.

Ethical Issues

The use of PAR importantly helps to build up some protection against the most pressing problem of the social researcher. I did not want to be an informer, a spy (Allen, 1997) a function that social research too often seems to serve. The issue with research here is its systematic abuse for aims of controlling, policing, and steering populations. This problem has been brought to academic self-reflection by Foucault's (1991) studies of governmentality, which he understands to be a principle of domination that extends beyond the institutions of governments (Dean, 1999). Research thus plays a vital role in 'governing' societies not only because it provides crucial information to government agencies but in its very own practices of rationalisations, gazes and measures that it applies to its research objects.

The process of knowledge production in academia is functionally knitted to the political domination of certain paradigms of knowledge and therefore power (Foucault, 1972).

The use of PAR helps prevent the 'parasitical' tendency of research of social movements (Urry, 1995, p.34) as the intention to conduct the research comes from within the researched field. The wish or need to know is shared by all those involved in the research process. The conscious and informed choices of research participants to take part in the research project are thus central ethical preconditions of my work. This responds to the legitimate fear of activists in contentious politics that their practices and actions are exposed and traded, commercialised or even handed over to security forces and police (Chatterton, 2008). But PAR also makes possible the tackling of more fundamental issue of governmentality. In so far as the research process is not only initiated but also constantly followed by the research participants the complex problems arising from the role of power in modern society are becoming tangible and visible to the research participants in the process. This may in some cases lead to their departure from the research process, but it may also enhance the understanding and effectiveness of the research and its wider political implications among participants.

Conclusion

The case study approach was a very useful tool for my research into political tourists. As the field is novel with few studies existing, there was a need to look empirically at individual cases and also to generate hypotheses and theories at the same time. Its advantage for my study was particularly pertinent in respect of the pragmatism it allowed in the use of a variety of methods.

Problems with the case study method in general relate to the underlying research philosophy. From the perspective of positivism, results of case studies cannot be generalised. However I made an argument that rejected this critique. The particular problems I encountered with the application of the case study method related to bias and ethics. I addressed them by mobilising PAR, involving the research participants in every step of the research process.

References

- Abercrombie, N., Hill, S. & Turner, B.S.(1984) *The Penguin Dictionary of Sociology* Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Allen, C. (1997) *Spies Like Us: When Sociologists Deceive their Subjects* Available at: <http://linguafranca.mirror.theinfo.org/9711/9711.allen.html> [Accessed February 20, 2009].
- Becker, H.S. & Ragin, C.C. (eds) (2005) *What is a case? : exploring the foundations of social inquiry* Cambridge [u.a.]: Cambridge Univ. Press.
- Campbell, D.T., Stanley, J.C. & Gage, N.L. (1966) *Experimental and Quasi-experimental Designs for Research* Chicago: R. McNally.
- Chatterton, P. (2008) Demand the Possible: Journeys in Changing our World as a Public Activist-Scholar *Antipode*, 40(3), 421-427.
- Dean, M. (1999) *Governmentality : power and rule in modern society*, London; Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Dick, B. (2002) *Action Learning and Action Research* Available at: <http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/arp/arp/aandr.html> [Accessed January 28, 2009].
- Flyvbjerg, B. (2006) Five Misunderstandings About Case-Study Research *Qualitative Inquiry*, 12(2), 219-245.
- Foucault, M. (1991) Governmentality. In G. Burchell, C. Gordon, & P. Miller (eds.) *The Foucault effect : studies in governmentality : with two lectures by and an interview with Michel Foucault*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 87-104.
- Foucault, M. (1972) *The Archaeology of Knowledge* New York: Pantheon Books.
- Geertz, C. (1995) *After the fact: two countries, four decades, one anthropologist*, Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Kemmis, S. & McTaggart, R. (2005) Participatory Action Research In Denzin, N. K. & Lincoln, Y. S. (eds.) *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, pp. 350-375.
- Kindon, S.L., Pain, R. & Kesby, M. (eds.) (2007) *Participatory Action Research Approaches and Methods : connecting people, participation and place*, London; New York: Routledge.
- Kuhn, T. (1996) *The Structure of Scientific Revolution* 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lamnek, S. (2005) *Qualitative Sozialforschung : Lehrbuch (in German)* 4th ed. Weinheim ;Basel: Beltz PVU.
- McNiff, J. (2002) *Action Research for Professional Development* Available at: <http://www.jeanmcniff.com/booklet1.html> [Accessed January 28, 2009].
- Popper, K. (1968) *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* 2nd ed., New York: Harper & Row.
- Ragin, C.C. (1992) "Casing" and the Process of Social Inquiry In Ragin, C. C. & Becker, H. S. (eds.) *What is a case? : exploring the foundations of social inquiry*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 217-226.
- Reason, P. & Bradbury, H. (eds.) (2008) *The SAGE Handbook of Action Research : participative inquiry and practice*, Los Angeles, CA; London: SAGE.
- Rosch, E. (1978) Principles of categorization In Rosch, E. & Lloyd, B. B. (eds.) *Cognition and Categorization*. Hillsdale, N.J.; New York: L. Erlbaum Associates ; distributed by Halsted Press, pp. 27-48.
- Urry, J. (1995) *Consuming Places*, London; New York: Routledge.
- Walton, J.,(2005) Making the theoretical case. In Becker, H. S. & Ragin, C. C. (eds.) *What is a case? : exploring the foundations of social inquiry*. Cambridge [u.a.]: Cambridge University Press, pp. 121-137.
- Yin, R. (1984) *Case Study Research : design and methods* Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Fabian Frenzel recently completed his PhD at Leeds Met. He is investigating political tourism, travels done in the name of activism and social change. This includes a variety of mobile practices, from political mega-events to protest camps and solidarity tourism. He is interested in the overlaps and relations between the 'personal' and the 'political' in these practices, the way they clash and converge, and shape contemporary activism. The choice of topic was motivated by experiences that he gained in active involvement in social movements in Europe and in Africa. Becoming an 'activist-researcher', he continued active engagement with social movements in the course of his doctoral research.

For an activist-researcher questions of positioning are paramount. Do social movements gain from research or it merely parasitical? Does a political tendency compromise the reflective needs of research? Certainly the identities of the activist and the researcher cannot be conflated and often conflict. Participant activist research (PAR) does not solve the conflict but it addresses the issue and offers approaches to deal with it constructively.