



Historical case study: A research strategy for diachronic analysis

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A B S T R A C T

History and case study are two diachronic research strategies commonly used to study political discourse as it relates to public libraries. Though suitable for some studies, these strategies are inexhaustive. A new, blended research strategy is therefore needed to accomplish what history and case study alone cannot. This hybrid strategy, historical case study, must analyze cases from the distant past to the present, using eclectic data sources, in order to produce both idiographic and nomothetic knowledge. To develop historical case study, the universal components of diachronic analysis are first identified. A general research design for historical case study is then introduced. Finally, historical case study is tested in an actual research project. Findings from this project reveal that historical case study is a successful diachronic research strategy. Historical case study is a new and valuable research design suitable for addressing questions related to change, continuity, development, and evolution.

1. Introduction

Studies about the public sphere and public libraries are commonly diachronic in nature. A diachronic study is one that views phenomena over time. Diachronic studies are important because they address research questions related to continuity, discontinuity, development, and evolution.

Diachronic studies related to political discourse and public libraries have adopted either history or case study as research strategies. These strategies are suitable for addressing certain research questions about certain types of cases. History has been used to investigate, for example, how the development of the public sphere influenced the development and function of libraries in the distant past (Emerek and Ørum, 1997; Schuhböck, 1983, 1994) and how public sphere discourse related to libraries changed over time (Vestheim, 1997a). Case study has been used to understand how political discourses influence decisions in public library systems (Audunson, 1996, 1999).

The value of history and case study notwithstanding, these research strategies are not suitable for all diachronic studies. This is because some studies do not fit well within the confines of either history or case study alone: some studies use cases that span from the distant past to the present, they utilize eclectic source materials, and they seek out both nomothetic and idiographic types of knowledge. Neither history nor case study alone can accomplish all these tasks.

Widdersheim and Koizumi (2017), for example, propose a diachronic study of communication in public libraries from the early 20th century to the early 21st century in order to develop both idiographic

and nomothetic types of knowledge. Without a new research strategy that incorporates characteristics from both history and case study, it is not clear how the proposed diachronic study might be carried out.

2. Problem statement

History and case study are inexhaustive research strategies. Some projects require a blended approach. There is a need in the research area related to the public sphere and public libraries for a diachronic research strategy that combines the features of history and case study. This hybrid strategy has not yet been developed in a formal way. The new research strategy must 1) study phenomena from the distant past into the present, 2) incorporate existing data sources as well as create new ones as the case unfolds, and 3) construct both idiographic and nomothetic types of knowledge. The solution to this problem is to develop a new hybrid research strategy, historical case study, which combines the features of both history and case study.

This study develops a new diachronic research strategy that 1) adopts both a retro and current view of a case or cases, 2) incorporates existing data sources and develops new ones, and 3) generates both specific and general types of knowledge. The findings of this study contribute a new research strategy to the area of political discourse and public libraries. The findings are significant for researchers interested in diachronic analysis.

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3. Literature review

Diachronic studies are those that investigate how or why something exists over time (Gerring, 2007, pp. 21, 28). Studies related to change, process, continuity, development, transformation, or evolution are types of diachronic studies. Diachronic studies contrast with synchronic, snapshot-like studies of phenomena limited to singular moments, such as the present.

In the research area related to public discourse and public libraries, diachronic studies are common. For example, the large-scale transformation of the public sphere in early- and late-modern societies is posited as an explanation for why public libraries developed when they did and what functions they served (Emerek and Ørum, 1997; Schubböck, 1983, 1994). The public sphere has been used as a framework for understanding changing discourses about libraries (Vestheim, 1997a). In a before-after analysis of three recent cases, reform pressures from political discourses were found to direct library system changes (Audunson, 1996, 1999). The public sphere has been said to govern and legitimate library systems over time (Evjen, 2015; Evjen & Audunson, 2009; Kann-Christensen & Pors, 2004; Widdersheim & Koizumi, 2016, 2017). While each of these studies related to political discourse and public libraries is distinctive and each addresses different research questions, they all adopt a diachronic view.

Given how studies about public discourse and public libraries address research questions that are diachronic in nature, existing research strategies should accommodate various types of diachronic analysis. A research strategy is a general research design or form. It is a general methodological approach, a template that facilitates thinking about a research project without necessarily stating specific data collection or analysis techniques (Creswell, 2014, p. 12). In other words, a research strategy is a general blueprint that shows how to construct a research project.

There are two main types of research strategies relevant to this area of research. Gerring (2007) defines case study and cross-case analysis as two main classes of studies. Both case study and cross-case analysis seek to generalize their findings to a broader domain of similar cases, but the two strategies differ in how they do this: case study focuses intensively on a smaller number of cases in order to understand processes in depth, while cross-case analysis uses a large number of cases to provide an overview of them. Each type of strategy is useful for different research purposes (Gerring, 2007, p. 38). Table 1 shows the typology developed by Gerring (2007, p. 28). Case studies are shown in gray, cross-case analyses are shown in green. According to this typology, an example of a diachronic case study research strategy is comparative-historical case study (strategy 6), and an example of a diachronic cross-case analysis is time-series cross-sectional study (strategy 8).

Research strategies that have been used to study public discourse and public libraries are case studies as defined by Gerring (2007): they

are intensive studies of a small number of cases. This type of research strategy has been used because the studies are exploratory, they seek to understand a case or cases in depth, or they seek to understand causal mechanisms. Because only this type of research strategy (small-N) has been used to study political discourse and public libraries, this study focuses exclusively on it and excludes cross-case analysis (large-N).

Though helpful for understanding the differences between case study and cross-case analysis, the typology developed by Gerring (2007) is problematic because it does not distinguish between diachronic studies of the distant past and those of the present. Yin (2014, pp. 16–17), for example, maintains history as distinct from case study, stating that case study examines the present or recent past while history examines the distant past. It is therefore helpful to amend the typology by Gerring (2007) to account for the distinction between history and case study. An amended typology of small-N studies appears in Table 2. Case studies are shown in gray, histories are shown in blue. The remainder of this study maintains this distinction between history and case study as seen in Table 2.

Among the diachronic studies of public libraries and the public sphere, one salient diachronic research strategy is history. As seen in Table 3, history has been used successfully to address research questions related to the public sphere and public libraries in the distant past (Emerek and Ørum, 1997; Schubböck, 1983, 1994; Thauer & Vodosek, 1978; Vestheim, 1997a). History is a research strategy that relies on archival documents to describe and explain phenomena from a time that can no longer be observed directly or from which few if any observers still exist. The Oxford English Dictionary defines history as “The branch of knowledge that deals with past events” (History, n.d). History, then, excludes analysis of the present. The result of a historical study is idiographic knowledge about a particular case or cases. Idiographic knowledge is unique knowledge specific to a particular case or cases (Calhoun, 2002, p. 224). History is primarily idiographic because a defining characteristic of history is its emphasis on particular forms of life (Windelband, 1980).

Another diachronic research strategy used to study political discourse related to public libraries is case study. Case study is the study of a case or cases in the present or the recent past (Yin, 2014, pp. 16–17). Table 4 shows several diachronic case studies that associate the public sphere with public libraries. Audunson (1996), for example, successfully used comparative case study to describe how public sphere discourses affected changes in three public library systems. Like history, case study relies to a degree on existing documents such as reports for source materials, but case studies do not emphasize archival research to the same degree as history. Moreover, unlike history, case study research generates new source materials such as interview transcripts, survey responses, and fieldwork notes from first-hand observations. These types of source materials are important in a case study because case study often examines a case as it unfolds in time. Archival sources

Table 1
A typology of research strategies developed by Gerring (2007, p. 28).

Cases	Spatial variation	Temporal variation	
		No	Yes
One	None	1. [Logically impossible]	2. Single-case study (diachronic)
	Within-case	3. Single-case study (synchronic)	4. Single-case study (synchronic + diachronic)
Several	Cross-case & within-case	5. Comparative method	6. Comparative-historical
Many	Cross-case	7. Cross-sectional	8. Time-series cross-sectional
	Cross-case & within-case	9. Hierarchical	10. Hierarchical time-series

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