



Methods for Change

# A Place-based Case Study Approach

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*In Place-based Case Study Approaches, research is framed around a particular place, which can take various forms: a ward, an island, a region or the geographical reach of an organisation.*

One aspect of Place-based Case Study research that is different from many traditional approaches is that research questions are not determined at the beginning of a project, but are developed in the process of carrying out research in a place. Researchers start with a broad view of a problem or topic and generate the important questions over time, as they become more informed. A Place-based Case Study Approach borrows largely from ethnographic research methods, studying 'doings' and 'sayings' of people within a defined geographical boundary. It thereby draws from a rich toolbox of methods, including informal, in-situ conversations, participant observation, archival research, and formal interviewing which can take different shapes – from structured interviews with local government representatives in their offices, to spending an afternoon partaking in conversations with a family in their living room. This approach often involves the collection of stories which complement systematically gathered data by illuminating the socio-economic and political complexities behind social and environmental challenges.

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## How does a Place-based Case Study Approach create or contribute to change?

By entering the field in an exploratory way and avoiding the use of pre-defined research questions, this approach can reveal misrepresentations that lead to misunderstandings about problems or phenomena as experienced by those living with such concerns. While research that follows this approach does not necessarily set out to create change, change is inherent in a Place-based Case Study Approach because it generates data which can lead to problems being framed differently. Case studies look at structures, rather than individual motivations. Research into food consumption provides one example of how reframing a problem can lead to a change in perspective: it is often consumers, and women in particular who are blamed for bad nutrition, and many research approaches and research questions can as a result be framed around seeking to re-educate and nudge consumers, and especially women, towards better choices. Taking a case study approach, larger political and economic circumstances and changes that lead to poor nutrition can be explored, reminding us that there are forces at work outside of the sole control of an individual consumer. Unearthing alternative perspectives can open fresh avenues for intervention that avoid well-trodden pathways towards the same tired and ineffectual outcomes. Such pathways are usually familiar to the recipients of such interventions, and thus, focused conversations with research participants which become situated within discussion of the emerging findings, make for a holistic, iterative interaction that can prove therapeutic for participants. Connections can be made between the social structures shaping their experiences and their roots in that place.

## What ideas or concepts influence this method?

Taking the approach of “starting research in order to generate research questions”, Place-based Case Studies are associated with the wider field of interpretative-qualitative approaches, which involve a degree of immersion and are inspired by grounded theory (an inductive approach where theory and concepts are developed during and after data collection). The approach is also underpinned by practice theory; focusing on observing patterns, actions, doings and sayings, which is different from approaches in which people are asked directly to share their experiences. While conversations about individual experiences may take place, in Place-based Case Study research they are contextualised within wider socio-economic and political structures, which are understood to shape experiences. The focus is therefore not on individual intentions and actions, but attention is instead paid to the interconnections between social structures, geo-political systems, and patterns of experiences, as embedded within a particular place.

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## Why might I want to use a Place-based Case Study Approach and what do I need to consider?

- Place-based Case Study Approaches are useful for understanding social and environmental challenges and require the researcher to enter a wider social field with an open mind. Over time and after various unstructured forms of exploration - such as: informal conversations with locals; site visits; attending local events; diving into archives - it becomes possible to establish what constitutes the 'case' with regards to its spatial and thematic boundaries.
- Place-based Case Studies allow researchers to explore several avenues at once, and to look at an issue through the lens of multiple research methods. The areas of exploration will expand and contract throughout the research process, as connections with other fields come to the foreground, and at times, retreat into the background.
- Researchers might gather insights from short in-situ conversations as well as formal interviews, and then represent these as stories or narratives. These more informal, unstructured findings may be overlooked or regarded as invalid in other research methodologies, but they can provide rich detail and can work to shift perspectives on an issue or problem.
- Case studies are well suited to exploring under-researched areas or topics, or where problems appear to be stuck. By allowing the researcher to explore connections in-situ in a way that other methods may not, this method is useful for studying areas and places where misunderstandings of problems are prevalent, and for enabling counter-narratives to be identified and developed.
- Taking a Place-based Case Study Approach is time consuming! The researcher will be in a place for a sustained duration; spending time with people, getting to know them, the community, and become known to that community, too. Participant observation of related activities is at the heart of the research process, and involvement in these aspects can take a lot of time. Although these activities may not be directly linked to the research focus, they are vital to understanding the landscape in which the case is situated, and to the success of the project.

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## Step-by-step guide to using a Place-based Case Study Approach:

- 1. Explore.** Do whatever you can to immerse yourself in the field. Go into the field first, ask questions and observe what happens around you. Only then will you begin to identify the research questions which help to identify and shape the parameters of the case.
- 2. Map Connections.** You might start with a large piece of paper, and think about all the different sites or spaces involved and connected with the problem and map them out. Ask: what individuals and groups are involved, and how do I access them?
- 3. Set parameters and draw a boundary around the case.** Once you have taken the steps outlined above, and have an understanding of the research problem at hand, you can build a “fence” or draw a circle around a particular place or space that you will focus on. Make sure these boundaries of the research setting, whether you research a community, a ward, or an organisation, are only developed once you have immersed yourself in a place.
- 4. Build a methods toolkit.** Once the case is established, make a list of the methods in your toolkit and think of the tools that you need, such as a notebook, camera and/or dictaphone.
- 5. Start applying the tools.** Figure out what you are comfortable with. You first need to build a picture of your case, so you might want to start with archives, oral history ‘go-alongs’, or informal conversations before you move on to interviews. Based on the background research, these informal encounters then progress into more formal one-on-one interviews, or group interviews. At this point, you might draw on the wealth of methods the social sciences has in its repertoire – both qualitative and quantitative – in order to develop a rich response to the research questions developed from the initial stages of case study research.

*Just because it is a case study of a particular place, you don't have to study everything going on in that place. At the same time, the boundaries that you draw as a researcher are permeable: connections and relations run in and out of your case study location. While interesting threads may be followed and investigated to a certain extent, creating the boundary helps to define the case, to retain a focus, and it stops the case from becoming too large and unwieldy! However, connections with larger processes outside of the fence of your case study will be part of the story. They may add flavour to the study or provide an undercurrent that sends ripples through the research, but without being fundamental to the analysis.*

*Make sure you do your own preliminary research on the place in question. Look through archives, news and books before you start interviewing participants. This will not only help you to prepare the ‘right’ questions, but it shows some respect to the participants. It is your responsibility to build a picture before you ask for peoples’ time, so that they are not presented with the task of doing this work for you!*

- 6. Pull out one thread and follow it.** Follow material things and connections. It is normal for things to become bigger - if you are doing it right, things will grow! Place-based Case Study research is a constant process of reflecting on what you want to do and whether you are still doing what you want to do.

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**7. Collate and analyse.** Pulling on a thread and following it using such mixed methods will leave you with multiple forms of data that must all be processed, arranged, managed, and analysed. Interviews will need to be transcribed, fieldnotes written up in full, photographs stored – perhaps in connection with a fieldnote – and notes taken in reference to archival material referenced. CAQDAS (Computer Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software) packages such as NVivo and AtlasTi work well as tools for data storage and management. They enable the coding of multiple forms of data, and allow you to keep

a record of the connections between themes emerging across data. You can also file data in multiple places according to their relevance to the themes that arise. This marks an initial stage of thematic analysis that begins the process of getting to know your data. How you go on to analyse the data depends on how you collected it: did you elicit narratives through formal interviews? In which case, subjecting the data to narrative analysis would be appropriate. If naturally occurring talk was recorded in the field, a conversation analysis would better suit this data, and so on.

### An example of a Place-based Case Study Approach in social science research

#### Understanding Food Insecurity Across a Small-Island Archipelago: A Place-based Case Study

**Researchers:** Dr Jessica Paddock with colleagues at the Sustainable Places Research Institute, Cardiff University, in collaboration with partner organisations including Department for Environment and Maritime Affairs (DEMA), TCI Red Cross, and the Department for Agriculture.

This study began as part of an interdisciplinary project 'Biodiversity for food security: seagrass meadows in the Turks and Caicos Islands (TCI)' but has evolved through relatively small injections of funding over several years into a case study informed primarily by a social scientific approach. The aim of the project, originally, was to explore the link between healthy seagrass meadows and food security at a local level.

#### Context

Through their provision of ecosystem services that support the development of a healthy fish community, seagrass meadows are thought to be valuable for

their contribution to food security, yet, their status and role in such matters was not well known outside the scientific community. This project, in part, sought to change that. First of all, an understanding of the processes and institutions that were at work in the governance of the marine and coastal environment was established. Through elite interviews with key actors in this arena – from the heads of departments to local enforcement officers – a picture of the challenges faced in protecting the health of these biodiverse islands in the context of rapid coastal development for tourism was built. At the crux of the matter - from a

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social scientific point of view - was the need to understand the dynamics of the food system as pertaining to that particular place, and to understand how these systems of provision worked for different communities in different ways. Only once such dynamics were understood, could the role of seagrass conservation in addressing problems of food insecurity be understood in ways that could inform or inspire change for the better, or indeed to preserve favourable conditions for current and future generations.

## **Methods used**

The social scientific methods employed across the duration of this case study (9 years so far!) include the analysis of archival materials such as photographs, maps and newspaper articles. They also include elite interviews, interviews with islanders while out in the field as participant observer - sometimes while volunteering in Red Cross Thrift Stores across the islands. These in-situ conversations, as opposed to semi-structured interviews, were essential in understanding the challenges faced by islanders as embedded in other routines central to daily life. Oral history interviews were employed later on in the

research process, in order to get to grips with how social and environmental change was understood by elders across the islands, as were group interviews where appropriate. For example, where a community group of women regularly meet, it made sense to join them, and to allow the interview schedule to be subservient to the flow of naturally occurring talk, and the sharing of stories and memories were left to emerge through their own talk, propelled by their own concerns and interests.

## **How findings were shared**

Findings were shared through multiple media. Academic articles were written, however, contributions were made also to local magazines and newspapers so as to contribute to the discussions abounding across the islands about the need to diversify sources of food in order to boost their resilience to environmental harms and food insecurity. The research conducted allowed the voices of several communities across the islands to be collated. This lent some weight to public discussions and policy developments that have since sought to reconfigure the food system in order to increase local production, and diversify their regional trade relationships.

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## Where else could a Place-based Case Study Approach be used?

This approach is useful in every context where community development work is happening. Many practitioners might apply versions of Place-based Case Studies to their ongoing work already, without framing it as a research method. Long-term and ongoing engagement with and knowledge of a particular case may mean that case study research has been happening without it ever having been intentionally framed as such. By following the steps outlined in this guide, various practitioners and organisations might fruitfully reframe the work they are already doing as an ongoing process of research and to develop a more systematic process for collating various forms of community data as evidence within these programmes of work.

## Top tips

1. Just start – get out into the field and immerse yourself!
2. Find focus, but be flexible: It's important to map the field, and to draw a boundary, but don't be afraid of reframing or changing it again.
3. Don't get overwhelmed by the amount of information you encounter. Just because it is a case study of a particular place, you don't have to study everything going on in that place.



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## Further reading

- What role for trade in food sovereignty? Insights from a small island archipelago\*
- Changing consumption, changing tastes? Exploring consumer narratives for food secure, sustainable and healthy diets\*

*\*If you are unable to access the full version of this article, please email the author to request a copy*

**To reference:** Paddock, J., Pottinger, L. and Ehgartner, U. (2021) A Place-based Case Study Approach in Barron, A., Browne, A.L., Ehgartner, U., Hall, S.M., Pottinger, L. and Ritson, J. (eds.) *Methods for Change: Impactful social science methodologies for 21st century problems*. Manchester: Aspect and The University of Manchester.



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