

Education Review

Reseñas Educativas



Resenhas Educativas

December 11, 2025

ISSN 1094-5296

Stake, R., & Visse, M. (2025). *Researching care with case studies*. Routledge.

186 pp.

ISBN 9781032987118

**Reviewed by Saville Kushner¹
United Kingdom**

Case study is a methodological procedure, but its practitioners have long worried about the engagement of the case researcher in terms of their moral obligations to respondents who are submitted to an intimate scrutiny of their life and work. Getting close up to people and practitioners means you have to take care with them – and care for them.

The field of social, medical and therapeutic care is, in contrast, a field of professional practice. It comprises skills and approaches at the physical and cognitive levels for therapeutic effect on patients. But this is expressed methodologically, and some, at least, of the methodology concerns how best to understand an individual, their family and their life context – in order to act effectively.

While the case researcher is not required to translate understanding directly into therapeutic action, she needs to delve into and understand the nature of that translation – how thought and theory interact with action.

So, case study and care share a great deal: physical proximity, emotional intimacy, careful thought about how to manage interactions and relationships, the essential grasp of context, understanding of moral obligations, what Stake and Visse call “poetic knowing”, and more. Both fields have, as a result, developed intricate discourses around ethics, culture and institutional politics – all explored here. A deeper inquiry, not merited by a book review, would explore both as linked expressions of Humanist and Democratic calling – but the book, itself, does lead us into these expressions.



¹ Editor's note: The reviewer is a close colleague of both of the book's authors. This in no way disqualifies a person from offering an opinion on a work, but it does require that such relationships be taken into consideration.

This book, *Researching Care with Case Studies*, is a unique attempt to bring the two fields into close unison, in such a way as to inform the challenge of both research student and supervisor to immerse themselves in the intricacies of engagement. Robert Stake, one of the early pioneers of case study method interweaves his knowledge with that of Merel Visse, a leading theorist and researcher of care – including care ethics and care aesthetics. They make a robust argument which goes beyond the obvious conclusion that case study, for its protocols of intimacy and insight, is an appropriate methodological approach to researching care environments. They show that care is a case, and that a case implies care. Each time a care practitioner engages with a patient or a vulnerable person they enter into a world of individualism which, while frequently (often correctly) being compared to numerous other such cases, merits understanding unique to that individual and their contexts. To care for an individual is to treat that person (and their family) as a case study.

To accomplish this, Stake and Visse present us with specific case studies – individuals and systems in care. These are real cases drawn from life experience and attend to the detail and density of individual experience – most often in an unending struggle for self-determination. Each case study is followed by a critique of the case and its reporting, giving invaluable insight into what counts as quality and validity in case-based inquiry. In fact, the book is replete with live and lively data, and with scaffolding to help understand how to generate such accounts, defend them and improve on them. Underpinning all of these accounts, and the methodological guidance the book offers, is an approach to validity based on ethics – care ethics. Ethical action – treating people with respect and fairness – is a lens through which we make judgements about accuracy of representation, the success at explaining phenomena, the weight given to experiential contexts, and the difficult balance to be struck between researcher engagement (that they care for their respondents) and impartiality – drawing back from the researcher's own preferences and advocacies.

There is nothing reductionist about this book, and there is no attempt to launder case methods of their complexity. In a real sense, this offers an induction into research sophistication, too often lacking in university research training. This book invites us into *methodological thinking*, not into the simple application of method. In places, that sophistication lurks quietly behind apparently simple expressions: *Validity is a function of researcher writing ability and the reader's reading ability* – try resolving that in your thesis writing! *Cases ever change and ever remain the same. We expect it and we forget it. Forgetting is the pitfall. Generalizing is the pitfall.* – this is only understandable once you have learned to perceive social change and its limits, and this requires immersion into the unique experience of members in a case. It is one of the more profound promises of case inquiry. At other times the sophistication is out there in the open, as with the encouragement to structure your research around lived experience and dilemma – to drive the research with issues, not just research questions.

This not at all to say that the book is inaccessible – far from it. The numerous case examples offer a firm grounding. And there are many examples of more direct and pragmatic expression. But it is to say that the book counters a modern tendency to control student – perhaps, more generally, university – research with the blunt tool of methods-simplification. There is little social and educational research that does not attend to the human condition, to the struggle we wage on a daily basis to come to terms with the convoluted society we have unwittingly created. And there is nothing at all simple about looking at, seeing and explaining those intimate corners of the human condition that we observe – how we learn, how we relate to each other, how we organise ourselves, how we confront existential uncertainties and how we come to terms with differences. The book’s focus on care immediately activates this complexity and denies a precipitate rush into faux understanding and explanation, much less the artless application of research technique.

Another theme running throughout the book is the place of subjectivity in care/case inquiry. Subjectivity revealed both as the researcher’s self-questioning and positioning in the ethical vortex that is human inquiry; and in the representation itself – the reporting of the case. *The story needs to be told much as it was lived. Experience encountered needs to become experience documented. Meanings are human constructions. Without subjectivity, some are grossly incomplete, formulaic.* There is little or nothing that is formulaic about this book. There is much that is formulaic about research training, and about the general scepticism shown by academic communities to subjectivity. But subjectivity – the essential grounding of intersubjectivity – is presented in this book as an essential tool for the researcher.

In a too-little noticed but still seminal contribution to the way we think about method, Stake replaced the tired, much-confected distinction between Qual and Quant with a more challenging, realistic dualism: Criterial/Experiential. Criterial approaches judge the quality of events against abstract standards imported into a specific context; Experiential approaches make those judgements against subjective and intersubjective experience within a context. This book sits firmly in the Experiential approach and is its best explanation.

The Issue of Generalisation and Comparative Cases

Though Stake and Visser do not deny comparison – both within and between cases – the thrust of the book is towards the study of single cases. If and when there is a tension between “breadth and depth” – what we learn by comparing like cases versus what we learn by the “deep-dive” – their leaning is towards the intensive study of singularity. And for good reason. The balance between repetition and diversity across cases has much to teach us about care settings. But the intricacies and complexities of care urgently need the comprehensive but acute insights gained from saturation. A single case – the study of experience-in-context, and of how phenomena interrelate – can stand alone as a powerful pedagogical tool. To use an ungainly mechanistic analogy, to compare the performance of engines across many models of car

is informative and supports decision making about which to buy into; but to understand the physics – and even the quantum physics – of combustion and reciprocating movement, together with the qualities of different grades of metal gives us insight into the *source* of diverse performances, and into the *consequences* of choosing one over others.

This speaks to a form of generalisation that allows us to use the term ‘like’ – when we refer to diversity across ‘like’ cases. The generalisation arises out of understanding the source of ‘likeness’ – what makes cases comparable. Of course, Stake is renowned for proposing another form of generalisation, what he termed naturalistic generalisation. Here, a single case is studied and practitioners in other cases are invited to relate their experiences and dilemmas to that case – to generalise the one case to their own, unique, case – say, a classroom or a school or a hospital ward. The practitioner reading the singular case study might conclude along one or another of these lines (these are of my own concoction):

- Yes, I see – that’s familiar, it helps me understand what’s happening here;
- Ah – ok – my case is entirely different, but that study brings my uniqueness into focus – it has been provocative to my colleagues;
- Mmmm...we’re very similar in certain respects, but I can see how we diverge in others;
- No – nothing like the context I work in – but the way they looked at that case is interesting. We might do the same here.

I have found the impact of this insight into generalising from a single case – thoroughly argued in this book – profound and extremely useful for my research students. Not for strengthening classical social science criteria for validity – generating transferability, replication, and so on – but for its capacity to foster dialogue among practitioners. In terms of *professional inquiry*, it is insightful and invaluable. We need a lot more of it in the field of researching professional action than we have so far provided. Especially the use of in-depth, single cases in professional training. This book, then, becomes essential reading for those who seek to generate the kinds of conversation among professional practitioners that are nurtured with true complexity and relying on experience as a source of theorising.

But I want to close by adding one further dimension to case study generalisation that was provoked by reading this book, and which is not properly addressed in it. This is the use of care case study and analysis for comparison and generalisation across *unlike* cases. I will be brief, for I do not want to unfairly critique the book for what it leaves out, and this risks becoming my own platform.

One of the brakes to the development of professional caring services – especially given contemporary movements from provision-led services to demand-led services – has been the fragmentation of care across much ring-fenced occupation groups. The term ‘carers’ embraces practitioners as

diverse as teachers, social workers, clergy, police, housing specialists, employment advisers, occupational therapists, social workers, community nurses and the full panoply of institutional actors who, together, form the warp and weft of the fabric of a welfare state. Given the multi-faceted nature of social problems encountered by people and families this diversity of groups collide from time-to-time in multi-disciplinary teams, case reviews, family services, disciplinary hearings and so on. The case having been reviewed, each practitioner retreats back behind their professional boundary. The interactions in these multi-disciplinary sessions are almost always complex, frequently exposing widely differing views of, say, children, timelines, tolerances, resourcing, shaping of solutions, ethical values, political awareness and more. To take a single example, a children's social worker and a schoolteacher will likely have different views of the child in terms of development. The social worker will often be tied to a therapeutic view of the child – complex interactions limited to the here-and-now, and to the return of the child to their 'normal' state of affairs. The teacher, on the other hand, has a view of the child (where not tainted by disciplinary demands!) as an agent and a subject of change. They look forward to the emergence of a person unrecognisable from this child, here and now.

Here are two cases (within the broad boundaries of 'care') that are unlike. They are alike in that they are perceived as elements of common system to which the citizen looks for support and nurture – but they are unlike in how they perceive *themselves*, their ethics, theories and folklores. Now add to these two a police officer, an employment adviser and the leader of the child's school 'gang' – the assumptions and stipulations underpinning practice are multiplied. The resolution, the drawing together and integrating of their multiplying differences seems to be compelling, the absence of a resolution, pathological. It is through the comparison of divergent cases across divergent contexts that promises pathways to resolution. Through informed conversation.

This cross-professional analysis can be extended and is so elsewhere in the literature. The literature sometimes talks of the shift from *disciplinary* practice to *multi-disciplinary* practice and, finally, to *interdisciplinary* forms of knowledge and action as practitioners move there and back across their boundaries. There is, however, little in the literature on professional knowing that honours the capacity of comparison across single case studies to underpin these shifts. A capacity based on research into the underlying 'social physics' of care. A tranche of single cases studied in experiential detail can reveal the parameters of fairness and potential harm that give rise to a diversity of ethical regimes. Admittedly, such cross-context comparisons are too easily frustrated by institutional fragmentation including isolated university faculties (competing with each other for research resources) and governance systems (departments of state, ministries). But they reveal a striking potential for advancing social knowledge and practice.

This issue of generalising across unlike cases and contexts has a particular urgency to it, which I will close with. This fragmentation of caring

services and professional identities has exposed them to contemporary, unrelenting attacks on welfare states – austerity regimes have picked them off one-by-one. Divide and rue, so to speak. Case studies – the greater majority of which are conducted by university research students – rarely see the light of day. Even more rarely are they admitted to policy conversations about professional, caring services. So, they only rarely and opportunistically feed into practitioner conversations – much less public conversation. While it has been easy for austerity regimes and ‘small-government’ advocates to erode the base of social care in its many guises, there has been little push-back from those services whose power-base is as fragmented as their resource streams. The citizenry, starved of a public narrative of value, could be – ought to be – the power-base from which caring services push back against attrition.

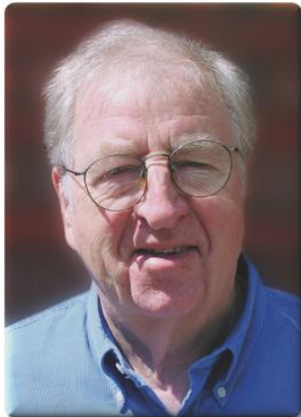
Stake and Visse make mention of a scholar, Sandra Laugier who gifts us the concept of care as *the politics of the ordinary*, governing relationships and resourcing at the level of experience. For Laugier, care interactions constitute politics conducted in ‘ordinary language’ (social conversation, practitioner discussions) – where we think of politics as the mediation of power and resources. Reducing research, deliberation and decision making to the level of experience is one of the pillars of this book, and it carries the strong implication that care practices will be subject to the judgements of the citizen and the practitioner. This is the adumbration of that concept, ‘the politics of the ordinary’. It speaks of citizen agency, and of the inevitable accountability of those who shape social policy to those who live and work in the sphere of ‘the ordinary’. Case study is powerfully represented in this book as an exemplary expression of ethics (and aesthetics), as the elevation of experience over assumption, and of individualism over group-ification. We can extend these with case study as an exemplary expression of ‘ordinary’ democratic values.

About the Reviewer

Saville Kushner has worked in a number of universities in England, New Zealand and Spain and served as a Regional Officer for the United Nations in Latin America. He has published numerous books and articles on educational research in both English and Spanish and is frequently invited to present keynote addresses at conferences worldwide. He is the author of *Evaluative Research Methods: Managing the Complexities of Judgement in the Field* as well as *School: An Exposé*. His book with Barry Kushner, *Who Needs the Cuts: Myths of Economic Crisis* was shortlisted for the UK “Bread and Roses” literary award. He worked for the United Nations as a Regional Adviser in Latin America and served as President of the UK Evaluation Society.



About the Book Authors



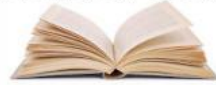
Robert E. Stake, born December 18, 1927, in Adams, Nebraska, is professor emeritus of education at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. After earning a PhD in Psychometrics at Princeton University in 1958, he assumed the position of assistant professor of educational psychology at the University of Nebraska, which he held until moving to the University of Illinois in 1963. He became Associate Director of the Illinois State Testing Program. The testing program was absorbed by the Center for Instructional Research and Curriculum Evaluation (CIRCE) in 1969. There he served as Co-Director and subsequently in 1975 as Director of CIRCE until his retirement in 1998. He has been a leader in development of program evaluation methods for decades. Among his many contributions are the 2010 book *Qualitative Research: Studying How Things Work*, *The Art of Case Study Research* in 1995, and *Measuring Education: The Countenance of Bob Stake*, 2024. Stake was the recipient in 1988 of the Lazerfeld Award from the American Evaluation Association and an honorary doctorate from the University of Uppsala in 1994. He also received an honorary doctorate from the University of Valladolid, Spain, in 2009. In 2007, Stake received a Presidential Citation from the American Educational Research Association “for his significant contribution to qualitative methodology, to the theory and practice of evaluation.”

Merel Visse is an associate professor and Director of Medical & Health Humanities at Drew University. She earned the PhD degree in Philosophy of Medicine at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. Prior to 2019, she spent more than a decade as a faculty member at the University of Humanistic Studies in the Netherlands, working with the Care Ethics Group. Dr. Visse also serves as the co-editor at Visual Arts Research, a University of Illinois Champaign-Urbana publication. She works in the interdisciplinary fields of care ethics, care theory and qualitative and artistic inquiry. Her research, writings and teachings revolve around connecting the arts with central insights of care. Insights such as relationality, affectivity, precariousness, responsibility, embodiment, vulnerability and (inter)dependency, and political theory on care. Merel’s work builds bridges between the everyday lived experiences of people and the socio-political realm of public issues. She follows a dialectic approach to research that is both responsive and critical. Care research is not only seen as a deliberate act of analysis in order to produce knowledge, but also as an event that requires a praxis of unknowing by living one’s questions real time.



Education Review

Reseñas Educativas



Resenhas Educativas



Education Review / Reseñas Educativas / Resenhas

Educativas is supported by the Scholarly

Communications Group at the Mary Lou Fulton

College for Teaching and Learning Innovation, Arizona State University.

Copyright is retained by the first or sole author, who grants right of first

publication to the *Education Review*. Readers are free to copy, display,

distribute, and adapt this article, as long as the work is attributed to the

author(s) and Education Review, the changes are identified, and the same

license applies to the derivative work. More details of this Creative

Commons license are available at [https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/)

[sa/4.0/](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/).



Disclaimer: The views or opinions presented in book reviews are solely those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent those of *Education Review*.