Contrasts Between Case-Study Research, Variable-Oriented Research, and Configurational Comparative Research

	Case-Study Research	Variable-Oriented Research
Proximate goals	Case study researchers focus on the problem of making sense of a very small number of cases, usually only one, and rarely more than three, selected because they are substantively or theoretically important in some way. The key concern is the meaningful representation of the case and its relevance to theory.	Variable-oriented research seeks to document general cross-case relationships between variables characterizing a large population of generic observations. The key focus is on the relative conformity of cross-case relationships with theoretically based models. Deductive theory testing is the key focus. Without well developed theory, correct model specification is impossible.

Configurational Comparative Research
Researchers study substantively or theoretically defined categories of cases (usually about five to fifty), with the goal making sense of both individual cases (and sets of similar cases) and cross-case patterns. Ideally, there should be a synergistic relationship between these two types of analysis.

	Case-Study Research	Variable-Oriented Research
Populations	The case-study researcher's answer to "What is my case a case of?" may change throughout the course of the investigation, as the investigator learns more about the phenomenon in question and refines his or her guiding concepts and analytic schemes. The fact that a single case can be defined in multiple ways is usually seen as a strength, making the case "rich."	In variable-oriented research, cases and populations are typically seen as given. The ideal-typic case (or "observation") is the survey respondent. Macrolevel cases such as countries are treated in the same generic manner. The key issue is how to derive a representative sample from the abundant supply of "given" observations.

Configurational Comparative Research
In comparative research, the investigator constructs a carefully delimited set of cases, using theoretical and substantive knowledge as guides. The boundary around this set is initially flexible and becomes more fixed as the research proceeds, through the interaction of ideas and evidence. Concept formation (what are my cases, cases of?) and empirical categorization (which cases belong and where?) go hand-in-hand.

	Case-Study Research	Variable-Oriented Research
N of cases	Case-study research is often defined by its focus on phenomena that are of interest because they are rare—that is, often an *N* of only one. Empirical depth is more important than breadth; therefore, enlarging the *N* is typically viewed as hazardous. Comparability of cases is never assumed and usually viewed as limited at best.	Variable-oriented researchers are encouraged to enlarge their number of cases whenever possible; more is always better. With more cases, researchers can make more precise estimates of the strength of the connections among variables. The individuality of each case is relegated to the error vector, giving the researcher a distilled representation of what is general across cases.

Configurational Comparative Research
Comparative researchers often make strategic comparisons and thus need cases that differ from one another (case "diversity"). At the same time, they need to maintain case homogeneity because their cases should all be instances of or candidates for the outcome in question. Thus, comparative researchers must balance conflicting pressures when delimiting the set of relevant cases.

	Case-Study Research	Variable-Oriented Research
Role of Theory	Case-study researchers use in-depth study of cases to challenge or advance existing theory. Thus, they often choose cases that are anomalous in some way from the viewpoint of current theory. A case study is considered successful even if it succeeds in showing only that existing theory is inadequate. Thus, case selection is critically important.	In variable-oriented research, it is presumed that researchers have well-defined theories and well-formulated hypotheses at their disposal from the very outset of their research. Theory testing is the centerpiece of social research. The ideal variable-oriented investigation adjudicates between competing, well-specified theories.

Configurational Comparative Research
Existing theory is rarely well-formulated enough to provide explicit hypotheses. The primary theoretical objective of comparative research is not theory testing, but concept formation, elaboration, and refinement, and also theory development. Sharpening the definition of the set of relevant cases and their key aspects is often an important theoretical advance in itself.

	Case-Study Research	Variable-Oriented Research
Conception of outcomes	Case-study researchers often select cases specifically because of their uncommon or anomalous outcomes. The usual goal is to resolve the anomaly in a theoretically progressive way, based on in-depth knowledge of the selected case(s). Often there is no sharp separation of causal conditions and outcomes, for an outcome may seem inherent in the constitution of the case.	Variable-oriented researchers are advised to direct their attention to "dependent variables" that display a healthy range of variation across a systematic sample of cases drawn from a large population. Usually, the more fine-grained this variation, the better. Outcomes that do not vary across cases cannot be studied because there is no variation to explain.

Configurational Comparative Research
Comparative researchers often begin by intentionally selecting cases that do not differ greatly from each other with respect to the outcome that is being investigated; that is, they are all "positive cases." The constitution and analysis of the positive cases is usually a prerequisite for the specification of relevant negative cases (i.e., candidates for the outcome)—if they can be reasonably identified.

	Case-Study Research	Variable-Oriented Research
Understanding of causation	Case-study researchers examine causation holistically, in terms of a convergence of structures, actors, and events. They are also centrally concerned with sequences and timing of events, with an eye toward turning points, path dependence, and actor orientations	Variable-oriented researchers assess the relative importance of competing independent variables in order to test theory. The key focus is the relative importance of causal variables across cases, not how they come together or combine in any single case. Usually, a single causal model is derived that applies uniformly and generically to all cases.

Configurational Comparative Research
Comparative researchers usually look at causation in terms of multiple pathways or recipes. Positive cases often can be classified according to the general path each traveled to reach the outcome. Each path, in turn, can be seen as involving a different combination of relevant causal conditions.

	Case-Study Research	Variable-Oriented Research
Within versus cross-case analysis	Case-study research is focused almost exclusively on within-case patterns. Researchers examine parts of the case as mutually constitutive of each other and the whole they form together. Case-study researchers often ask: 'What kind of whole has parts like this?' as they explore connections among case aspects.	Variable-oriented researchers give priority to cross-case patterns. Aspects of cases are viewed primarily in terms of how they vary and co-vary across cases. How aspects of cases connect *within* each case is more or less ignored. The idiosyncrasies of cases cancel each other out, as deviations from general patterns are assigned to the error vector of probabilistic models.

Configurational Comparative Research
Comparative researchers focus on configurations of causally relevant characteristics of cases, with the goal of determining how relevant aspects fit together. They use cross-case analysis to strengthen and deepen within-case analysis, and vice versa. To the extent possible, comparative researchers try to balance cross-case and within-case analysis.