

Comparing Multiple Case Studies of (Military) Chaplaincy Care: Methodological issues

Theo Pleizier & Carmen Schuhmann

Introduction: Case data, case analysis, and case comparison

The Dutch Case Studies Project (CSP) aims to answer the question of what chaplains do, for what reasons and to what ends (Walton & Körver, 2017). The answer to this research question is sought in a series of single case studies of chaplaincy care. In this project we coordinate a research community of military chaplains in which case studies of chaplaincy care within the Dutch Armed Forces are collected. Speaking about 'collecting' cases, however, is methodologically not precise enough. The cases have a rather high level of construction (Mason, 2018). They are constructed or generated in two phases. In the first phase, one chaplain describes and interprets one case of pastoral care from her or his own chaplaincy practice according to a detailed list of observational, interpretative, reflective and evaluative questions. This phase one case description is then presented to the research community of fellow chaplains and (a) researcher(s). In the second phase, the case is further interpreted and evaluated in the research community.

This procedure is unique and does not fit into the existing models of case study research described by authors like Yin (2014) or Thomas (2016). For instance, there is no obvious answer to the question of what counts as the data that are to be analyzed. Nor is there a clear distinction between data and analysis. Do the data consist of the 'raw' data - the recordings or verbatim reports of conversations - or do the data consist of the phase one description by the chaplain? It is also possible to understand the data as the entire generated case, the 'raw' material, the case description by the chaplain and the reflections of the research community generated in phase two. Hence, the understanding of 'data' remains rather vague in the format that is used in the CSP. The format suggests that the phase one case descriptions by the chaplain are the data which are then analyzed in the research community. In that case the entire case report - description (phase one) plus analysis (phase two) - is an unusual 'hybrid case report' consisting of data followed by analysis. Literature on case study research points to a distinction between cases as 'data' or as 'outcome' (Thomas & Myers, 2015; Ridder, 2017). For the CSP the question remains whether the entire case study (phase one and two) counts as data or as outcome of research?

In the project, the eventual case studies are in the first place seen as provisional outcomes of research. The methodological picture becomes even more complex when the question of case comparison comes in. Walton and Körver (2017) write that "the approved text (of the case study) then can be kept for later comparison, or offered for publication" (p. 268). They mention the need for comparing multiple case studies and argue for a 'cumulative effect' of building up evidence by adding single cases that in themselves may be rather idiosyncratic (Walton & Körver, 2017, p. 269). This suggests that the final case reports as a whole can also be considered as data that are in need of further analysis. Hence, the idea of 'data' in the CSP is multilayered. First, we have the 'data' generated by the chaplain, the phase one case description. Second, there are the phase two 'data' generated in the discussions in the research community in search for interpretative perspectives of the case. Thirdly, there are 'data' on the level of the entire case: each complete case study becomes data in a comparative analysis with other case studies. This raises the question of what properly counts as data in relation to the CSP's central research question. In this article we propose an approach of multiple case analysis in which single case descriptions are seen as pieces of data that require further analysis instead of as outcomes.

In the military chaplaincy research community that we are both involved in as researchers, the issue of case comparison emerged while discussing single cases. This research community consists of six military chaplains, working in multiple contexts of the Dutch Armed Forces: the army, the navy, the air force, the military police, and the institution for veteran care. In our meetings, unplanned, we started to compare new cases with cases we had discussed earlier. We also questioned the selection of cases: do they adequately capture the variety of practices within the field of military chaplaincy? Against the background of our conversations in the military chaplaincy

research community, this article positions the analysis of cases within the wider field of case study research and addresses issues that are involved in setting out a route for analysis across cases.

Chaplaincy in the Dutch Armed Forces

In the Netherlands, military chaplaincy has a dual structure of legitimacy. On the one hand, the Ministry of Defense appoints chaplains within the Dutch military, where they “contribute to the (existential) wellbeing of soldiers, civilian personnel, veterans and the home front, and to the morality of the Armed Forces as a whole”.¹ Military chaplains always work within a particular military unit like the navy or the air force. Depending upon the scope of the unit, the chaplain works within small multi-denominational chaplaincy teams. On the other hand, the sending worldview institutions (for instance the churches or the Dutch Humanist Association) are responsible for the personal, professional and spiritual competencies that are required in chaplaincy. Given this structure, chaplains do not exclusively work within their own denomination but serve the military of an entire base, platoon, or unit in a mission abroad. Military chaplains must therefore be able to work across denominations. The chaplains in the military chaplaincy research community represent three different religious/worldview backgrounds: Protestantism, Roman Catholicism and humanism.

In collecting cases of military chaplaincy, we therefore need to be aware of the following aspects. First, the cases presented by the chaplains usually involve situations where the worldview background of the soldier does not match that of the chaplain. Only in a few cases do the soldier and the chaplain share a similar religion or worldview. Second, cases usually concern a particular military unit, for instance the navy or veteran care. Third, some cases concern so called ‘base care’: chaplains interact with the military personnel at the base that they are assigned to. Other situations concern deployment care: the chaplain serves a unit that is part of a (peacekeeping) mission. For the Case Studies Project, this entails the methodological question of what kind of chaplaincy care is studied. It is reasonable to state that, in the military chaplaincy research community, individual cases are cases of *military chaplaincy care*, but we have to bear in mind the diversity of the military context, according to denomination, to military unit, and to care situation (base care or care during deployment).

Methodological challenges of single case analysis

According to Thomas (2016), a case study offers “a rich picture with many kinds of insights coming from different angles, from different kinds of information” (p. 21). The format that is used in the CSP collects descriptions, verbatim reports of conversations, and interpretations by the chaplain (phase one) and interpretations of this particular, unique instance of chaplaincy care by the research community (phase two). The description by the chaplain counts as one source of information and the analytical perspective of the research community, including its consensus and discussions, as additional sources. In the research format, there is also room for feedback on the case by the client or by other professionals. Still, the perspective of (the) chaplain(s) is dominant. The eventual case studies are, in the first place, narratives of care provided by chaplains. The data collected in single cases in the CSP do not seem to meet the criteria for offering a ‘rich picture’ according to the methodologies of scholars who call for using multiple sources, such as documents, interviews, field notes etc. (Yin, 2014; Thomas, 2016).

Even when we understand a case as ‘one unique story’, its uniqueness only makes sense in relation to broader analytical categories. Hence, we have to ask: what is this a case *of*? In the case of single narratives on military chaplaincy, the question ‘what is this a case of’ can be answered on two levels of abstraction. First, the single cases that are collected in the Case Studies Project can be understood as single incidents of interactions between a chaplain and a soldier. Each single case tells a part of the story of the larger case of ‘military chaplaincy in the Dutch army at the beginning of the 21st Century’. The larger case is defined by time (beginning of the 21st Century) and place (in the

¹ Translated from <https://www.defensie.nl/onderwerpen/personneelszorg/geestelijke-verzorging>.

Dutch Army). Time and place function as boundaries of the case 'military chaplaincy'. Multiple cases actually count as multiple pieces of information of the single case 'military chaplaincy in the Dutch Army'. Next, on a more abstract level we can take military chaplaincy itself as "an instance of a class of phenomena . . . which the case illuminates and explicates" (Thomas and Myers 2015, 7; 56–58). Comparing military chaplaincy with chaplaincy in other domains, larger cases are compared to the largest case, namely 'chaplaincy' (the object, that of which it is a case *of*).

The denominational, contextual, and situational differences sketched above, emphasize the importance of comparing different cases when answering the research question - what do chaplains do, for what reasons and to what ends? In the discussions of our research community, chaplains regularly commented in relation to a particular case that certain aspects of the case were characteristic for chaplaincy care in the context of the Dutch Army or even in the context of a specific unit within the army. These comments are partly captured in the research format under the heading of the case selection: does it concern a 'representative' case, a 'paradigmatic' case, an 'outsider' case, or a 'critical' case? Still, the question remains how a single case contributes to answering the broader research question. By comparing multiple cases we obtain theoretical ideas for analytic patterns across cases.² A single case then functions as incident for a pattern that transcends the single incident.

Examples of analytic patterns across cases

In order to demonstrate what the outcome could be of an approach of cross-case comparison, we present three patterns that started to emerge when discussing single cases in the military chaplaincy research community. These patterns are tentative as they have been generated by comparing the first four cases of military chaplaincy, but, given this limitation, they illustrate sufficiently the need for (reflection on) multiple case analysis: comparing more cases will provide a more nuanced and theoretically richer picture. In the project we aim to collect around 15 cases in total.

Positioning within MoD

The first pattern concerns the behavior of the chaplain in relation to the larger institution of the Ministry of Defense (MoD). In one of the cases, an officer visits the chaplain for advice concerning a letter he got, indicating that he could no longer serve within the army because of financial cuts within the organization. In the conversation with the soldier, the chaplain did not side with the soldier against the MoD. In another case, a chaplain pays a home visit to a soldier who, due to physical, psychological, and social problems, is allowed time off from work during the last two years before his official retirement. In the conversation with the soldier the chaplain empathizes fully with the soldier and takes a critical stance towards the MoD. In a third case, the chaplain provides a completely different view of the mental health of a soldier than the military psychologist. The chaplain is open for a religious interpretation of experiences of the soldier, while the military psychologist interprets these experiences as pathological. In each of these three cases we see how the soldier is an actor in a large organizational system. While supporting the soldier, the chaplain constantly has to choose his or her position in the system.

Distinguishing between soldier and human being

In the case of the soldier who received the letter from the MoD resulting in his resignation, the chaplain challenges the soldier's self-understanding. He feels how the soldier identifies himself with the work in the military. In his response, the chaplain challenges the soldier to move beyond this self-understanding to envision a future outside the military. In another case, the chaplain talks about the price that the soldier and his family have to pay for his work in the air force. The chaplain is able to connect the difficulties that the soldier experiences at work with his larger biographical story. In doing so, the chaplain invites the soldier to look beyond his military functioning and to relate to

² This raises the question of how to take into account the type of case (representative, paradigmatic, outsider, or critical) when comparing single cases.

himself as a human being. This pattern re-occurs in other cases. Military chaplains refuse to see the soldier only from the military perspective. They help the soldier to look at himself as a human being instead.

'Being known' as a chaplain

In several cases, soldiers emphasize the importance of having met and spoken with the chaplain before. In one case, a soldier contacts a chaplain who is not associated with his unit but whom he has met during a mission. The trustworthiness of the chaplain seems to reside in 'knowing' this individual chaplain, and having established a connection with her or him. There is, however, also a case where the soldier contacts a chaplain that he had never spoken before, in order to discuss religious struggles. In this case, the soldier does not know the individual chaplain from earlier meetings, but recognizes the chaplain as a representative of religion. 'Being known' as chaplain – either as an individual chaplain or as a representative – seems to be an important precondition for providing chaplaincy care in the military. Further cases are needed in order to gain more insight into the role of different kinds of 'knowing the chaplain' in chaplaincy care.

Comparing cases: Sampling issues

The eventual aim of the CSP is "to make the case for what chaplains do, for what reasons and to which ends" (Walton & Körver, 2017, p. 271). The focus in the project is on the single case: the idea is to gather multiple single cases from multiple contexts (military chaplaincy, prison chaplaincy, elderly care, hospital chaplaincy, etcetera.) in order to provide practice-based evidence for chaplaincy care. According to Yin (2014), cross-case synthesis is helpful for 'making a case': "The analysis is likely to be easier and the findings likely to be more robust than having only a single case" (p. 164). Even when we question the notion that multiple case analysis provides more 'robust' findings than single case analysis, in view of the aim of the project - using single case studies for building an argument that transcends specific situations, contexts and denominations - the cases need to be analyzed in relation to each other. With a view to cross-case analysis, questions concerning sampling explicitly come to the fore. "How one compares and contrasts cases will depend on the purpose of the study and how cases were sampled" (Patton, 2002, p. 452). At the start of the project, one sampling criterion was formulated: the chaplain who describes the case must understand the case as an example of 'good chaplaincy practice'.

Sampling strategies will inevitably influence what aspects or sub-questions of the CSP's rich and broad research question will be emphasized and which ones will tend to disappear from view. When we asked the chaplains in the military chaplaincy research community halfway the project about their views on the picture of military chaplaincy that was emerging from the case studies so far, they were skeptical. They felt that cases that fit with the research format are not representative of military chaplaincy. Practices of 'being present' and of 'making small talk' are missing. They also felt that typical themes that soldiers discuss with chaplains had not come up in the cases: boredom, drug use, loss of a beloved one and mourning, getting into a fight when going out, and loss over time of the ideals with which soldiers enter the military. We as researchers noticed that there were only few cases in which experiences of war and violence played a central role, and that religion and worldview were generally not explicit themes in the cases. These observations might lead to different sampling strategies: we might want to add as a sampling criterion that one of the missing themes plays a role, or that religion/worldview is an explicit theme in the case. Looking at the three emerging patterns described earlier, we might also adapt sampling to 'make the case' for one of the three patterns. Cases that help us gain insight in how the military system resonates in chaplaincy care (first pattern) do not necessarily also help us gain insight in how chaplains address soldiers as complex human beings (second pattern) or into the significance of 'being known' in chaplaincy care (third pattern). Moreover, when we look at the three patterns from a perspective of the Case Studies Project as a whole, the question arises which issues emerging in the military chaplaincy research community also play a role in other domains than the Military, and which ones are relevant for 'making the case' for chaplaincy as such. From the perspective of cross-case comparison in the

project as a whole, different sampling strategies might be decided upon. Currently, sampling is done by the individual chaplains somewhat haphazardly: they decide which case they present. In the military chaplaincy research community, we discussed the sampling of cases in order to create a more balanced and diverse sample of cases. We think that the project as a whole may be served with intentional strategies for data selection. Cross-case analysis could provide the necessary methodology. For instance, if the entire case of military chaplaincy is the object of research, single cases should be purposefully selected to account for the rich data that are necessary for describing the broader case of military chaplaincy.

Reflecting on the aim of the project and on sampling strategies seems especially important given the inevitable political aspect of research. Whether intentionally or not, the CSP has an impact on how chaplaincy is perceived and understood by chaplains and other stakeholders such as the sending organizations (churches) or managers in care facilities or in governmental institutions like the ministry of Justice or the ministry of Defense. A crucial question in 'making the case for chaplaincy' is which audiences we are addressing in our research: what kind of audiences do we think or hope find the evidence from the project convincing (Damen, Schuhmann, Leget & Fitchett, 2019)? In the case of military chaplaincy, this question is especially relevant. Findings from the project might, for instance, suggest that the denomination of the chaplain is not a decisive factor in chaplaincy care, which might question the denominational structure of chaplaincy care provisions. Or, findings might suggest that military chaplains play a role in reducing health-related absence, which could have as a result that the value of military chaplaincy is henceforth evaluated in terms of reduction of absenteeism. All in all, it seems worthwhile to reflect with various stakeholders on purposes and strategies of case comparison from a viewpoint of the project as a whole before the project ends.

Conclusion

Case studies have been around in practical theology for a long time as a means for educating students for pastoral practice (Schipani, 2014). In case study projects, including the CSP, case studies are collected in order to sustain and improve the chaplaincy profession (Fitchett, 2011) Our reflections on comparing single cases of military chaplaincy care suggest that, with a view to the original research question, we need a two-sided focus on both single and multiple case analysis. A single case describes and explains a phenomenon sufficiently and adequately according to its uniqueness and completeness. Apart from being a case in itself, the single case narrative is also 'just' another piece of data that adds to the 'many and varied angles' from which the subject - namely (military) chaplaincy - can be looked at (Thomas & Myers, 2015, p. 8). These incidents, though, need to be compared, because 'each individual case is less important in itself than the comparison that each offers with the others' (Thomas & Myers, 2015, p. 62).

With its emphasis on the research value of the single case, the project is in need of a methodology to compare cases. Given the amount of cases generated in the project, the research possibilities for cross-case comparison are endless. There are multiple ways to proceed: we might, for instance, focus on comparison of case studies collected within a specific setting of chaplaincy care, or use other selection criteria like the denomination of the chaplain, specific spiritual needs of clients, or a specific intervention. We might even take the analysis one step further and compare results of cross-case comparison of different strata - settings, denominations, interventions - in the total collection of case-studies.

In order to unlock the project's potential for cross-case comparison, we need to reflect on the question of what methods to use for multiple case analysis. Walton and Körver (2017) state that "the comparison will take different forms" (p. 269). Methods for case comparison need to be chosen in relation to (the aim of) the specific aspect or sub question of the overarching research question that the comparison aims to address.³ For instance, when the aim of the comparison is descriptive, thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) offers a versatile approach. According to Fitchett (2011),

³ Reflection is also needed on the question of what are the data that are used for cross-case comparison, 'original data' used for writing the phase one case descriptions, or one/both of two different parts of the final phase two case reports.

description is the main aim of case studies: “Before we can do good clinical trials about our spiritual care, we need good case studies describing our work” (p. 4). In the CSP, case studies are located higher up in the research hierarchy. Cases are not ‘just’ evidence to base practice upon but, instead, constitute ‘practice-based evidence’. For cross-case development of theory, we need methods that aim “to move qualitative inquiry beyond descriptive studies into the realm of explanatory theoretical frameworks” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 6). Methods that include constant comparison, such as grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss 1967; Holton & Walsh 2016), are promising candidates to move beyond the single case studies towards a more integrated conceptual understanding of chaplaincy care. Including ‘constant multiple case comparison’ in the research while the project is still running enhances flexibility – in particular the cyclical flow between data collection and data analysis - and reflexivity in the research process, which does justice to the qualitative character of the project.

References

- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative research in psychology* 3 (2), 77-101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063>
- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. London, UK: Sage.
- Damen, A., Schuhmann, C., Leget, C., & Fitchett, G. (2019). Can outcome research respect the integrity of chaplaincy? A review of outcome studies. *Journal of Health Care Chaplaincy*. doi: 10.1080/08854726.2019.1599258
- Fitchett, G. (2011). Making our case(s). *Journal of Health Care Chaplaincy*, 17(1–2), 3–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08854726.2011.559829>
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The Discovery of Grounded Theory. Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Chicago, IL: Aldine.
- Holton, J. A., & Walsh, I. (2016). *Classic grounded theory: Applications with qualitative and quantitative data*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Mason, J. (2018). *Qualitative Researching* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Ridder, H.-G. (2017). The theory contribution of case study research designs. *Business Research* 10 (2), 281–305. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40685-017-0045-z>.
- Schipani, D. S. (2014). Case Study Method. In B. J. Miller-McLemore (Ed.), *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology* (pp. 91–101). Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Thomas, G. (2016). *How to do your case study* (2nd ed.). Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Thomas, G., & Myers, K. (2015). *The anatomy of the case study* (1st ed.). Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Walton, Martin N, and Jacques W G Körver. (2017). Dutch Case Studies Project in chaplaincy care: A description and theoretical explanation of the format and procedures. *Health and Social Care Chaplaincy* 5 (2), 257–80. <https://doi.org/10.1558/hsc.34302>.
- Yin, R. K. (2014). *Case study research: Design and methods* (5th ed.). Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

Published in: *Learning from Case Studies in Chaplaincy. Towards Practice Based Evidence & Professionalism*, Eburon 2020, 102-111.