The following is a pre-publication version of

Andrews, P. (2017). Is the 'telling case' a methodological myth? *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 20(5), 455-467. doi: 10.1080/13645579.2016.1198165

Included is an online appendix

Is the ‘telling case’ a methodological myth?

This paper discusses the ‘telling case’ (Mitchell, 1984) and the manner and extent of its use in social research. The ‘telling case’, proposed by Mitchell as a counter to prevailing expectations of typicality, is an ethnographic case study, derived from analytic induction and focused on the exposure of new theoretical insights. By means of an evaluation of the available literature this paper summarises Mitchell’s construal of the ‘telling case’ before examining how it has been exploited by others. The evidence suggests that while authors acknowledge the source of the ‘telling case’ few offer any substantial acknowledgement of Mitchell’s conceptualisation, indicating that most ‘telling case’ research has employed Mitchell’s name somewhat disingenuously and contributed to the growth of a methodological myth. Moreover, despite its international spread, its origins seem located in the work of a small number of internationally recognised scholars and the mobility of their former graduate students.

Keywords: case study, ethnography, telling case; analytic induction

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Introduction

This paper was motivated by a recent submission to an academic journal. Subsequent to the usual sets of reviewer comments, my colleague and I had undertaken two revisions before being confronted by the editor insisting that publication was conditional on our acknowledging our research as a “‘telling’ case (Mitchell, 1984)”. Drawing on both Stake’s (1995) and Yin’s (2009) categorisations, we had construed our research as an exploratory instrumental multiple case study that involved various forms of data collection with teachers working in a European country different from the one in which my co-author and I worked at the time. It was exploratory because we aimed to develop hypotheses for further inquiry (Bassey, 1999; Woodside, 2010; Yin, 2009). It was instrumental because we hoped it would advance the collective understanding of the issue under scrutiny (Crowe et al., 2011; Stake 1995) and it was multiple because our aim was to examine the professional reality of several teachers, each of whom offered a unique perspective on our investigation (Stake, 1995). Thus, the editor’s condition came as a surprise, not least because the ‘telling case’ was unfamiliar to us. So, for the sake of expediency we identified some appropriate references and made an amendment to the paper. Afterwards, having colluded in a practice of dubious integrity, I felt compelled to explore the extent to which, as D. Baker (1996) indicated, there is a ‘telling case’ methodology. This led me on an interesting journey as I sought to understand the origins of the ‘telling case’, the nature of its spread and the extent of its misuse. (End page 455)

To understand the relationship between Mitchell’s ‘telling case’ and mainstream perspectives on case study, I turned first to commonly used case study textbooks like Bassey (1999), Simons (2009), Stake (1995), Willig (2008), Yin (2009) and the 1100 pages of Mills et al.’s (2010) Encyclopedia of case study research. This led to one simple conclusion; the ‘telling case’ is invisible in mainstream case study research. Yet, as is shown below, the ‘telling case’ is growing as a way of framing how case studies are construed. In this paper, therefore, my aim is to examine what is meant by the ‘telling case’, the manner of its use in various research fields and the mechanisms by which that use has grown. In so doing my intention is not to provide a warrant for Mitchell’s conception of case study - he does that very well himself - but to highlight how others’ use of the ‘telling case’ may have contributed to the growth of what might best be described as a methodological myth. But first, in order to locate Mitchell’s ‘telling case’ more generally, I turn to contemporary case study literature.

Current perspectives on case study

Case study has a long and honourable history. For example, 400 years ago Kepler's meticulous recording of Mars' annual journey around the sun led not only to his identifying its elliptical orbit but also his inferring that all planets orbit similarly. Such work, not uncommon in science, typically focuses on the ways in which a deep analysis of a particular case informs subsequent general theories. Today, case study is widely used in social research and generally construed as an in-depth and contextually located empirical investigation of a phenomenon of interest to the researcher (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Stake, 1995; Woodside, 2010; Yin, 2009). However, beneath this broad consensus can be identified elements of divergence. For example, there are those for whom the phenomenon must be contemporary (Yin, 2009), while for others it can be historical (Woodside, 2010). Case studies are frequently bounded (Bassey, 1999, Baxter & Jack, 2008, Stake, 1978) by, for example, time, location or activity (Creswell, 2003; Stake, 1995). However, the need to set boundaries, typically justified as a means of preventing a case from growing too large, depends on whether researchers are *realists*, who bound their cases in the belief that "there are populations of cases or empirical clusters that researchers need to uncover and analyze" or *nominalists* who believe that "cases are theoretical in nature and that researchers create them through investigation" (Wells et al., 1995, p. 21). A different but not unrelated distinction can be found in cases focused on the causes of effects (CoE) and those focused on the effects of causes (EoC), where "a CoE study is centered on the outcome and seeks to discern the relevant causes" and "an EoC analysis is centered on a cause and asks whether it has a (specific) effect on a given outcome" (Rohlfing, 2012, p.40). The former, in focusing on identifying causes, tends to be open and more aligned with the ambitions of the nominalists. The latter, focusing on effects, tends to be closed and more resonant with the aims of the realists. These distinctions allude to another important divergence. Depending on the researcher's goals, case study is either based on theory or seeks to develop it (Meyer, 2001). Finally, there is the role of the representative case. On the one hand are scholars who argue that an atypical case tends to be richer than a typical (Flyvbjerg, 2006), with its power for generalisation lying in the quality of the analysis and the clarity of the narration that shifts responsibility for generalisation from the researcher to the reader (Stake, 1978). On the other hand, there are analysts who argue that case study generalisation is only possible from a representative or typical case (Rohlfing, 2012; Ruddin, 2006).

Mitchell and the case study

To understand why an editor should insist on its inclusion, it is necessary to understand how Mitchell positions the 'telling case'. Unfortunately, the oft-cited 1984 piece is but a short section of a chapter on data collection in a book given to the conduct of ethnographic research. Indeed, Mitchell's contribution covers barely four pages of the book's four hundred, brevity that necessitates reference to an earlier paper (Mitchell, 1983) on which the 1984 section draws extensively but in which there is no reference to 'telling cases' (End page 466).

Mitchell positions himself as a social anthropologist and argues not only that case study is a common method in social anthropology but also that the field "has been built up... from a large number of separate case studies" enabling anthropologists "to draw inferences and to formulate propositions about the nature of social and cultural phenomena in general" (Mitchell, 1983, p.189). In this context, case studies draw on the collection of "descriptive material an observer has assembled by whatever means available about some particular phenomenon... prior to any deliberate analysis (Ibid, p.191). A year later he asserts that case studies, which are "concerned with the imponderabilia of everyday behaviour", are detailed presentations of "data relating to some sequence of events from which the analyst seeks to make some theoretical inference" (Mitchell, 1984, p.237). He comments that when...

“setting out a case study, the analyst must decide in advance at what point to enter the ongoing flow of events and at what point to withdraw from it. For the purposes of exposition, a set of events must be lifted from the ongoing stream and presented, as it were, isolated from antecedent and subsequent events” (Mitchell, 1984, p.237).

In both his 1983 and 1984 pieces, essentially summarising the status quo, Mitchell discusses a hierarchy of forms of case study. First, he discusses case study as ‘apt illustration’, whereby researchers select from the available evidence appropriate illustrations of the principles under scrutiny. Second, at an interim level of sophistication, he discusses case study as a ‘connected set of events’ or ‘social situation’. Here the “emphasis is on the theoretical connection between the ‘bounded’ (Mitchell, 1983, p. 193) events rather than the attributes of the events themselves” as manifested “in the behaviour of the protagonists and their interpretation of the behaviour *as conditioned by that situation*” (Mitchell, 1984, p. 238, his emphasis). He adds that the “particular situation for analysis is therefore a crucial tactical consideration for analytical purposes”. Third he discusses the extended case, the most sophisticated of the three forms. The extended case “recounts events over a relatively long time period” and “allows the analyst to present material which contributes an historical or dynamic dimension to the account” (Mitchell, 1984, p. 238). Here “the same actors are involved in a series of situations in which their structural positions must continually be re-specified and the flow of actors through different social positions specified” (Mitchell, 1983, p. 194). Irrespective of form, data remain data until they are subjected to some form of systematic analysis from which the cases emerge. Moreover, particularly the more sophisticated forms, case study analyses focus on theoretical inferences.

If one examines the dominant writers in case study research then Stake and Yin emerge at the head of the field. The former, typically associated with a constructionist epistemology, seems more closely aligned with Mitchell than the post-positivist traditions of Yin (Boblin et al., 2013). For Stake, cases, which “are chosen because it is believed that understanding them will lead to better understanding, perhaps better theorizing, about a still larger collection of cases” (Stake, 2000, p. 437) and imply no obvious need for typicality. For Yin (2009), cases are chosen to facilitate the testing of a theoretical proposition and imply typicality. Moreover, Mitchell’s views seem more resonant with the *nominalists* than the *realists* (Wells et al., 1995), more closely aligned with the aims of cause of effect studies than *effects of causes* studies (Rohlfing, 2012). In sum, case study typically tests or develops theory (Meyer, 2001) and Mitchell seems to resonate strongly with the latter. Finally, each of Mitchell’s characterisations presents a particular perspective on typicality and whether, in fact, typicality is a necessary objective, an issue to which I now turn.

Typical and telling cases

A reading of the different forms of case discussed above shows that case typicality plays different roles according to context. For example, typicality is a key element of case study as ‘apt illustration’, not least because the case’s illustrative role requires observers to “be convinced of its typicality to be able to use it as an illustration” (Mitchell, 1983, p. 193). However, the remaining forms of case, whether social situation or extended case, are implicated in the generation of theory. In this regard, Mitchell suggests that a “case study is essentially heuristic; it reflects in the events portrayed features which may be construed as a manifestation of some general abstract theoretical principle” (Mitchell, 1983, 192). This latter point concerning the “manifestation of some general abstract theoretical principle” superficially (End page 457) implies a need for cases to be typical of some wider population. However, Mitchell counters such expectations by discussing the distinction between enumerative induction and analytical induction. The former, essentially derived from the statistician’s expectation of

representativeness, “establishes *sufficient* conditions for the phenomenon to occur” (Mitchell, 1983, p. 202). It takes the latter, based on the scrutiny of cases chosen to “illuminate formerly obscure aspects of the general theory”, to isolate “the *necessary* circumstances for the manifestation of some phenomenon” (Ibid, p. 202, my emphases). Thus, acknowledging the desire to establish the necessary conditions, cases should be chosen to demonstrate those theoretical connections between the data themselves and the phenomena under scrutiny that were previously “ineluctable”. That is

“...the search for a ‘typical’ case for analytical exposition is likely to be less fruitful than the search for a ‘telling’ case in which the particular circumstances surrounding a case, serve to make previously obscure theoretical relationships suddenly apparent” (Mitchell, 1984, p.239).

The above sentence is the only reference Mitchell makes to ‘telling cases’ in either his extended (1983) paper or the oft-cited (1984) book section. It reflects a view that “the particularity of the circumstances surrounding any case or situation... must always be located within some wider setting or context” and that “case studies allow analysts to show how general regularities exist precisely when specific contextual circumstances are taken account of” (Mitchell, 1984, p.239). In other words, case studies are “clearly more than ‘apt illustrations’” but the means “whereby general knowledge may be developed, since it is through the fieldworker’s intimate knowledge of the interconnections among the actors and events constituting the case study or social situations, that the fieldworker is strategically placed to appreciate the theoretical significance of these interconnections” (Mitchell, 1984, p.240). In other words, Mitchell’s position is closely aligned with that of Flyvberg (2006) and Stake (1995) in that a case’s generalisability lies in the quality of the analysis and the clarity of the narration that shifts responsibility for generalisation from the researcher to the reader. However, while making a strong allusion to the significance of analytical induction in this process, Mitchell acknowledges that the nature of and arguments for analytical induction “are more fully set out in Mitchell (1983)” (Mitchell, 1984, p.239).

Analytical induction

Mitchell first alludes to analytical induction when he points out, something he believes other researchers had failed to acknowledge adequately, that any extrapolation from case material is “based on the validity of the analysis rather than the representativeness of the events” (Mitchell, 1983, p.190). He reminds his readers that studies based on enumerative induction, while identifying correlations between events, fail to identify the logical connection between them; “the inference about the logical relationship between the two characteristics is not based on the representativeness of the sample and therefore upon its typicality, but *rather* upon the plausibility or upon the logicity of the nexus between the two characteristics” (Ibid, p.198). To achieve such plausibility analytical induction aims “to specify the necessary connections among a set of theoretically significant elements manifested in some body of empirical data” (Ibid, p.202). In this respect it is interesting to note that Rohlfing (2012) writes extensively about necessary and sufficient conditions in case study research but, like many case study textbooks, makes no reference to Mitchell.

Significantly, Mitchell closes this section by acknowledging that

“no case study can be presented in isolation from the corpus of empirical information and theoretical postulates against which it has significance... The single case becomes significant only when set against the accumulated experience and knowledge that the analyst brings to it. In other words the extent to which generalisations may be made from case studies depends upon the adequacy of the underlying theory and the whole corpus of

related knowledge of which the case is analysed rather than on the particular instance itself’ (Mitchell, 1983, p.203).

In summarising Mitchell’s position, it is important to note that in his earlier paper he discusses the “significance of the atypical case” (Mitchell, 1983, p.203) and the manner in which it offers “instances (End page 458) where the concatenation of events is so idiosyncratic as to throw into sharp relief the principles underlying them”, providing, of course, the researcher is sufficiently familiar “with current theoretical formulations” as to be able to recognise such concatenations for what they are (Mitchell, 1983, p.204). In his later book section, although he does not explain this decision, he abandons the ‘atypical’ for the ‘telling’. My conjecture is that this is because a case, as construed in this way, requires neither typicality nor atypicality but is chosen to “make previously obscure theoretical relationships suddenly apparent” (Mitchell, 1984, p.239). The ‘telling case’ emerges from data rather than defines them, and, in exploiting fieldworker’s profound understanding of the relationships between actors and events, is deeply contextual and considerably more sophisticated than an ‘apt illustration’ or descriptive (Yin, 2009).

Summarising Mitchell

In this last section on Mitchell’s perspectives, I present a short synthesis of what I believe to be the major characteristics of the ‘telling case’. In so doing I acknowledge the speculative nature of such a task, not least because Mitchell, who died in 1995, never expanded on his intended meaning and cannot be consulted. That being said, I think there is enough in the two papers (Mitchell, 1983, 1984) to suggest that ‘telling cases’ are

- rooted in anthropological and ethnographic traditions;
- more than just illustrative;
- derived from data;
- focused on a contemporary issue;
- based on analytical induction;
- dependent on the validity of analysis;
- focused on making visible previously hidden or poorly understood theory;
- focused on identifying the necessary conditions for that theory’s relevance;
- neither typical nor atypical of the phenomena under scrutiny;
- not necessarily focused on generalisation
- simultaneously context dependent and context acknowledged.

Finally, the above distinguish the ‘telling case’ from, say, the illuminative case, which is typically found in research on health care education. Here the aim, which is unrelated to Mitchell’s conception of case study, is to examine the interaction of the instructional system itself and the learning milieu (Ellis, 2003). The above also distinguish the telling case from Yin’s (2009) exemplary case, not least because the exemplary case should be significant by virtue of its atypicality; an argument that Mitchell refutes. In other words, while are other case study descriptions with a superficially similar meaning to the ‘telling case’, a closer scrutiny highlights the extent to which they differ from it. In the following, therefore, I examine how others have articulated their use of the ‘telling case’ and, in so doing, consider the extent to which their warrants draw on a deep understanding of Mitchell’s conceptualisation or contribute to the growth of a methodological myth.

Methods

An initial Google Scholar search on “telling case” yielded 3870 hits, reduced to 495 after the inclusion of the word, Mitchell. However, ‘telling case’ is a common figure of speech leading to many hits including both the search term and reference to a Mitchell different from the man under scrutiny. Once these were eliminated 141 hits remained. A second phase, involving the same search strategy, exploited the search engines of the major journal publishers¹ and increased the total number of useable articles to 155. The substantive content area of these papers covered educational research, particularly language, mathematics and science; medical research, including dentistry and patient-practitioner relationships; various perspectives on linguistics; higher education in general and the (End page 459) nature of graduate studies in particular; various perspectives on human rights in general and minority groups in particular; business in general and publishing in particular; the use of social media in different contexts and so on.

Once identified, articles were read and text relevant to how authors’ warranted Mitchell’s ‘telling case’ extracted. In addition, author affiliations were collected and, where possible, previous employment and locations of doctoral studies gathered from institutional websites. This latter process facilitated tracking of the ‘telling case’ journey. The process revealed four distinct ways in which authors justified their use of the ‘telling case’, each structured according to how Mitchell’s 1984 book section has been deployed. The first concerned studies in which Mitchell had been quoted directly, the second comprised sources in which Mitchell had been paraphrased, the third referred to those studies that warranted a ‘telling case’ by means of an expression like, *in this paper we focus on one teacher who could be construed as a ‘telling case’* (Mitchell, 1984). Finally, the fourth considered those papers that warranted their ‘telling case’ by citing others who had cited Mitchell. Throughout, primarily to save space and avoid unnecessary repetition, I refer to *Mitchell’s paragraph* or *the paragraph*, which is the single paragraph in which he mentioned ‘telling case’:

“It should be obvious that the inference from case studies is based on analytical induction. What the anthropologist using a case study to support an argument does is to show how general principles deriving from some theoretical orientation manifest themselves in some given set of particular circumstances. A good case study, therefore, enables the analyst to establish theoretically connections between events and phenomena which previously were ineluctable. From this point of view, the search for a ‘typical’ case for analytical exposition is likely to be less fruitful than the search for a ‘telling’ case in which the particular circumstances surrounding a case, serve to make previously obscure theoretical relationships suddenly apparent” (Mitchell, 1984, p.239).

After presenting these four sections I attempt, not least because the data are not complete and involve a little speculation, to chart the evolution of the ‘telling case’.

Results

In the following reference is made to an online appendix. In this can be found lists of the uncited references that have warranted the arguments presented. The inclusion of these would have extended the paper beyond a reasonable length.

The ‘telling case’ is warranted by explicit reference to Mitchell

¹ Here the major journal publishers were construed as, alphabetically, Elsevier, Sage, Springer, Taylor and Francis and Wiley-Blackwell. In addition, smaller publishers such as Emerald Journals and the publishing arms of Cambridge, Chicago, Harvard and Oxford universities, were also scrutinised.

Single sentence warrants

A quarter of all examined papers included direct quotations from Mitchell's 1984 book section. Of these, the majority offered warrants based on single sentences from the paragraph. The most frequently occurring warrant emerged from all or part of the final sentence. Typical was, Pitt's (2015, p. 206) "I present this discussion of my research... as a 'telling case', which, as Mitchell (1984, 239) states, is a case that enables the researcher 'to make previously obscure theoretical relationships apparent'". Similar approaches were found in the 15 studies, found in section 1 of the online appendix. Finally, two studies (Abell & Roth, 1992; Anthony et al., 2014) cited Ellen, the editor of the book in which Mitchell's section appears, rather than Mitchell himself.

Other studies derived their warrants from different sentences from the same paragraph. In this respect Hornberger's (1997, (p.92/93) justification was not dissimilar to others. She wrote that what an "anthropologist using a case study to support an argument does is to show how general principles deriving from some theoretical orientation manifest themselves in some given set of particular circumstances" (Mitchell, 1984, p.239)". Similar warrants, all tied to the particular circumstances of the research being reported, were offered by the five studies found in section 2 of the online appendix. Two other studies based their use of 'telling case' on the sentence asserting that a "good case study, therefore, enables the analyst to establish theoretically connections between events and phenomena which previously were ineluctable" (Mitchell 1984, p. 239). These were Hasrati (2013) and Street (End page 460) (2011). Finally, two studies, Bohning and Hale (1998) and Guinée (2014) exploited single sentences from within the paragraph.

Multiple sentence warrants

Eight studies, as shown in section 3 of the online appendix, warranted their use of the 'telling case' by means of a presentation, with minimal editing, of the whole paragraph. Four others offered extended accounts in which Mitchell's case study principles were discussed at length. In such examples, as with the four studies found in section 4 of the online appendix, could be seen not only evidence of authors having internalised Mitchell's perspectives on case study in general but the 'telling case' in particular. They presented not only explicit acknowledgements of Mitchell's ethnographic background but also awareness of the relationship between case study and theory building. An atypical variant of this practice was a brief reference to Mitchell in the text followed by a footnote in which an extensive summary of Mitchell's position was presented, as in Rex (2000). However, the extent to which others have shown similar awareness seems limited. The majority of studies citing Mitchell's own words seem to have been selective with respect to which of his emphases they adopt, an issue to which I return later.

The 'telling case' is warranted by implicit reference to Mitchell

Making visible theoretical connections

While a minority of studies warranted their use of 'telling cases' by explicit reference to Mitchell's 1984 book section, a slightly higher proportion did so by paraphrasing his words. Of these, a substantial number focused attention on the making visible of theoretical inferences. For example, Córdova et al. (2015) offered the following to warrant their work, albeit with an incorrect page number,

"We narrow our analytic focus by constructing two telling cases which Mitchell (1984, p. 222) argues is a form of ethnographic inquiry that focuses on particular chains of human activity and events in order to make theoretical inferences; a telling case is a particular kind

of case study that makes visible something that may not have been previously known” (p.176).

In a similar, but briefer manner, Castanheira et al. (2007) justified their use of ‘telling cases’ by commenting that case study “students were purposefully selected because they constitute a subgroup of students across years, or what Mitchell (1984) calls a telling case, one that makes visible new theoretical understandings” (p. 174). Similar justifications were found in the 18 papers shown in section 5 of the online appendix. Atypically, Kumpulainen and Lipponen (2011, p. 53) went beyond a warrant based solely on the making visible of theory to discuss the relationship of the researcher’s contextual knowledge to the creation of the ‘telling case’. They commented that

“through our analysis we created what Mitchell (1984) calls a telling case. Mitchell argues that ethnographically described events can be presented to make logical inferences or generalizations that will serve to illuminate obscure aspects of general theory”.

Moreover, their “selection and analysis of telling cases is informed by the researcher’s knowledge of the connections between the telling case and the contexts informing the researcher and the participants constituting a telling case”.

Make visible new insights

A similar number of authors warranted their use of the ‘telling case’ on the basis of its making visible new insights not explicitly linked to theory. Typical of such studies was that of Stewart et al. (2014) who commented that they had “used an ethnographic approach to construct telling cases (Mitchell 1984) that make visible how three students, as members of different discussion sections, met the learning outcomes in different ways” (p.935), reflecting the warrants observed in 18 studies found in section 6 of the online appendix. However, some of these justifications were very short. For example, Córdova and Matthieson (2010, p.454) asserted that “Telling cases, proposed by Mitchell (1984), serve to make visible something that was previously not available to be known”. Finally, in this section, one paper (Moje, 1999, p. 312) warranted her use of ‘telling cases’ by referring to Ellen (1984). (End page 461)

Typical versus telling case

A small number of studies warranted their use of the ‘telling case’ on the basis of its not being typical. In this respect, the comments of Martin-Jones and Saxena (1996) were typical of others; a particular videotaped science teaching activity was chosen for analysis “because it is a ‘telling’ example”, and because, as “Mitchell (1984) suggested, focusing on telling cases is more fruitful in ethnographic work than searching for typical cases” (p. 112). Five other studies, found in section 7 of the online appendix, warranted their ‘telling cases’ in this way.

The ‘telling case’ warranted by reference to “‘telling case’ (Mitchell, 1984)”

In addition to those studies that warranted their use of the ‘telling case’ by either explicit or implicit reference to the content of Mitchell’s (1984) book section, the largest group, within which can be found the editor whose insistence prompted this paper, comprised those studies that cited the phrase “‘telling case’ (Mitchell, 1984)” as their warrant. Typical examples were, “For the purposes of this writing, I have chosen to present a ‘telling case’ (Mitchell 1984) developed from Lara and the children’s work...” (Eckhoff, 2013, p368). The only variation lay in how ‘telling case’ was written; “I present Tara as a telling case (Mitchell, 1984)” (Park, 2013, p. 299); “In other words, it was a “telling” case (Mitchell, 1984, p. 239)” (Wargo, 2015, p. 52); “We select Clover as an example of what Mitchell calls a ‘telling case’ (page 239)” (Swinglehurst and Greenhalgh, (2015, p.7) and so on. In similar vein, the 53 studies found in

section 8 of the online appendix justified their use of the ‘telling case’ in this way. Finally, the three studies found in section 9 of the online appendix, cited Mitchell in much the same manner but referred to his 1983 paper, which makes no reference to ‘telling cases’.

The ‘telling case’ warranted by reference to someone who cites Mitchell

Finally, six studies, shown in section 10 of the online appendix, warranted the ‘telling case’ by reference to authors who cited Mitchell. Of these, Dabach (2015, p.391), when discussing tensions in a US high school citizenship classroom, wrote that her

“case is a “telling” one. Drawing from Mitchell (1984), Gallo (2014) notes that “a ‘typical’ case is analytically less useful than a ‘telling’ case in which the complexities surrounding that case can provide insight or nuances into theoretical relationships” (p. 484)”.

Tracking the ‘telling case’

The investigation of the literature on the ‘telling case’ uncovered three things. The first, as shown in table 1, was that the ‘telling case’ was a late, but once discovered, growing phenomenon. Indeed, acknowledging that Mitchell’s book section was written in 1984, the earliest references to a ‘telling case’ yielded by the search were Abell and Roth (1992) and Street (1993), but it was not until the latter half of the 1990s that it began to take off, a growth that has continued at an increasing rate since then. Of course, it is possible that sources written in the intervening period may not have been digitised or catalogued electronically.

Time period	Number of articles
1984-1990	0
1991-1995	2
1996-2000	15
2001-2005	22
2006-2010	35
2011-2015	81

Table 1: Distribution over time of ‘telling case’ articles ([End page 462](#))

The second, in terms of frequency of occurrence, concerns the disproportionate involvement of a small number of institutions, each typically tied to one or two individuals, in the construction of the ‘telling case’ narrative. These locations, two in the UK and three in the US, are King’s College, London and Lancaster in the UK and the state universities of California, Ohio and Michigan in the US. In every case, any named researcher can be found either in the reference list below or the online appendix.

With respect to the UK, the members of staff, former PhD students or visiting scholars with connections to King’s College, London and have written ‘telling case’ research are Askew, Back, D. Baker, Block, Cooke, Georgakopoulou, Golding, Hasrati, Hodgen, Jones, Lefstein, Leung, Li, Marks, Moriarty, Prinsloo, Roberts, Shrubsall, Snell, Street, Tomlin and Venkat. Moreover, Swinglehurst, affiliated to Queen Mary, London, co-authored a paper in 2014 with King’s-based Roberts and Li. Since then, she has written ‘telling case’ papers with Greenhalgh, Russell and Shaw at Queen Mary and Parsons at Cardiff. With respect to Lancaster, the following authors have employed ‘telling case’ frameworks; Barton, Cowley, Gillen, Martin-Jones, Papen, Sunderland.

In terms of the USA, the list of ‘telling case’ related researchers associated with California includes Antilla-Garza, W. Baker, Baumgartner, Castanheira, Chrispeels, Collins, Converse, Cook-Gumperz, Córdova, Crawford, Dabach, Dai, Dixon, Dyson, Frank, Green, Heras, Jennings, Joo, Kyrtzis, Martin-Jones, Putney, Reid, Rex, Skukauskaitė, A. Stewart, J. Stewart, Stritikus, Williams and Yeager. The Michigan group includes W. Baker, Collins, Dyson, Däumer, Jackson, Kirkland, Moje, Rex, VanDerHeide and Wargo, while those writing ‘telling case’ material with connections to Ohio include Beierle, Blackburn, Bloome, Crumpler, Gallo, Grigorenko, Haneda, Isik-Ercan, Katz, Newell, Olsen, Sands and VanDerHeide.

So, acknowledging that such a small number of groups is unlikely to occur by chance, are they connected in ways that may explain the growth of the ‘telling case’ narrative? During the early 1990s Street was working at the University of Sussex with Bloome, as a visiting scholar, and Barton, who was already at Lancaster. Their collaboration produced two books of relevance to this narrative. The first, Bloome, Sheridan and Street (1993), brought Mitchell and his ‘telling case’ to a wider audience. The second, Barton, Bloome, Sheridan and Street (1993) confirmed Barton’s connection to the group. In other words, Bloome, who was already ten years into his 30 year collaboration with Green; Street, who would shortly move to London; and Barton, who was already at Lancaster, were already exploiting the ‘telling case’ as a way of interpreting ethnographic data.

Later the same decade Street moved to King’s College, London and, it seems, the ‘telling case’ went with him. Today, many of the King’s College group have promoted the ‘telling case’ from various other locations. For example, Askew (Monash, Australia), Back (Plymouth and Cambridge, UK), Hasrati (Razi, Iran), Hodgen (Nottingham, UK), Lefstein (Ben-Gurion, Israel), Marks (Brighton, UK), Prinsloo (Cape Town, South Africa), Snell (Leeds, UK), Venkat (Witwatersrand, South Africa). The Lancaster group seems less travelled but Barton’s ‘telling case’ tradition there continues.

Bloome returned to the US and, while continuing his collaboration with Green, eventually settled in Ohio. The first indication of California-based Green exploiting the ‘telling case’ was in a late 1990s paper (Kelly and Green, 1998) in which she cited Bloome et al. (1993). This led to her involvement in not only 20 of the articles discussed above but a movement that has extended across the US. For example, Putney went from California to Nevada and has co-authored ‘telling case’ material with Utah-based Broughton. Jennings went to Colorado and continues to report ‘telling case’ studies; Córdova found his way to Missouri and established a group including Taylor, Whitacre, Singer, Cummings and Koscielski. Dyson moved to Illinois and was part of a group that included Handsfield, Crumpler, Dean, Seloni, Cummings and Goldman. W. Baker, Dyson (again) and Rex moved to Michigan and were part of a group that came to contain Collins, Däumer, Jackson, Kirkland, VanDerHeide and Wargo. Dabach and Stritikus moved to Washington, with the latter supervising the PhD of Lucero. Looking beyond the US, Kumpulainen, having worked with Green as a visiting scholar, returned to Helsinki and continued to work on ‘telling case’ research with Toom and Saalasti, while Bridges, affiliated to Hong Kong, has collaborated with Green on several ‘telling case’ articles. Finally, with respect to the growth of the Lancaster group’s ‘telling case’ research, it is interesting to note that Martin-Jones, one of the group’s (End page 463) leaders, obtained her PhD from Stanford and is unlikely to have been unaware of the work of Green, Dixon and Dyson, highlighting a second Lancaster connection.

In sum, and acknowledging again the speculative nature of a narrative extracted from institutional websites and author details on their respective papers, it is not improbable that the ‘telling case’ movement began with the early 1990s collaboration between Barton, Bloome and

Street and spread by means of their collaborations with colleagues at Lancaster, California and King's College, London respectively.

The third is the extent to which the 'telling case' is an Anglophone phenomenon. Indeed, of the 155 articles discussed above, only two, Engevik et al. (2015) and Guinée (2014), written in Norway and Netherlands respectively, appear unconnected to any Anglophone influence. Four others, while superficially independent of such influences, were found to be otherwise; Farah-Quijano (Colombia) has a PhD from the University of East Anglia, England, while Ortaçtepe (Turkey) has a PhD from SUNY. Others with a more obvious connection to the 'telling case' narrative are Hasrati (Iran), with a London PhD supervised by Street, and Kumpulainen (Finland), who was a visiting scholar with Green in California.

Discussion

This paper began as an investigation into the literature of the 'telling case' (Mitchell, 1984). The aim was to uncover not only what Mitchell meant by the 'telling case' but also how others have warranted their use of it. The analysis has uncovered several points of interest. The first is that the 'telling case' is invisible in mainstream case study discourse, even though there are researchers with long-standing international reputations who have exploited it repeatedly over many years; the 'telling case' has permeated the writing of Bloome, Green and Street for decades.

The second, stemming from the first, is the extent to which the 'telling case' is an Anglophone construct. It is commonplace in a relatively small number of institutions in both the UK and USA, typically due to the presence of the same key researchers and their acolytes, as well as a small number of centres internationally due to the mobility of the same researchers. However, very few of the discussed papers stemmed from researchers working in non-Anglophone countries with, as far as my searches could ascertain, no connections to the core group of Anglophone researchers.

The third is that while the 'telling case' can be found in many research fields, reviewed papers were predominantly located in different domains of language learning. There were many papers from on other education-related fields, particularly mathematics education, almost all of which can be connected to King's College, London. There were a few from fields like business management, gender studies, healthcare, media studies, poverty and publishing but, interestingly, almost no evidence of the 'telling case' in Mitchell's own discipline of social anthropology.

The fourth point lies in the ways that researchers have acknowledged Mitchell's conceptualisation of the 'telling case'. In this respect the data show that while a few scholars have acknowledged the characteristics of the 'telling case', the majority have not. With respect to the former, detailed acknowledgements were typically found in sources co-authored by the three key players of Bloome, Green and Street. With respect to the latter, a scrutiny of the reference list shows considerable variation in the ways in which the same authors failed to address them. For example, Bridges and her collaborators authored papers found in three of the categories above; an implicit making visible of new insights, an implicit making visible of new theoretical connections and the least well-warranted citation of "'telling case' (Mitchell, 1984)". However, further highlighting the inconsistent use of the 'telling case', each of Bloome, Green and Street has also been implicated in studies with a poor warrant for the method.

In sum, Mitchell offers a fairly clear construal of the 'telling case', a construal rarely acknowledged in the majority of papers cited above. Indeed, of the examined papers, only five offered narratives in which Mitchell's ideas were presented in ways that demonstrated their having been internalised and made transparently relevant to the authors' intentions. Beyond

these, and an equally small number of studies that warranted the ‘telling case’ by means of a summary of the 1984 ‘paragraph’, half of all papers were warranted by no more than the citation of a single sentence from the ‘paragraph’ or a (End page 464) paraphrase of one of those sentences, most frequently tied to the exposure of theory. Moreover, even when cited, a number of studies interpret him incorrectly in at least three ways. Firstly, some authors imply that Mitchell places the typical and the telling cases in opposition (Guinée, 2014); Stritikus, 2003). However, while Mitchell asserts that the latter may be more informative than the former he does not present them as opposites but argues, at least implicitly, that the telling case can be typical; its function lies solely in its ability to inform theory. Secondly, the nine studies listed in section 11 of the online appendix contradict Mitchell’s assertion that the ‘telling case’ is more than an apt illustration and present ‘telling cases’ as illustrative. Thirdly, some have implied that the ‘telling case’ is a methodology, something to which neither of Mitchell’s papers allude (D. Baker, 1996; Cooke, 2006; Córdova et al., 2012). Lastly, perhaps the most disconcerting outcome was that 40% of all studies, including that of the editor that provoked this paper, justified their ‘telling case’ solely by means of the expression “‘telling case’ (Mitchell, 1984)”.

So, can the brevity of so many ‘telling case’ justifications be explained? In this respect I think there are at least five possible explanations, some less benign than others. The first is that authors, conscious of the space limitations within which they typically write, are forced into inappropriate brevity. The second is that many of the authors who cite Mitchell misunderstand his construal of ‘telling cases’. That is they construe their research as, say, a case study focused on the exposure of theory and draw, rather simplistically, on Mitchell’s words to warrant their actions. The third, less benign, explanation is that researchers knowingly select only those elements of Mitchell’s framing that are explicitly relevant to their research. For example, one can imagine researchers ignoring Mitchell’s expectation of analytical induction when their focus is solely on the uncovering of previously hidden theory. The fourth, even less benign, explanation is that authors have not read Mitchell but simply copied convenient citations from the work of others. This is easy to understand for at least two reasons. The ‘telling case’ has a seductive charm and superficially transparent logic. Also, the book in which it is introduced is difficult to track down. It is a book of an era that academic libraries are weeding out; the well-preserved copy I bought for the benefit of this paper had been withdrawn from a university library. The fifth, and least benign, explanation is that researchers cite Mitchell simply to warrant their figurative use of the ‘telling case’. Such practices are at best misguided and reflective of poor scholarship; at worst they are disingenuous.

All five possibilities, notwithstanding the small number of scholars who have engaged meaningfully with Mitchell’s conceptualisation of the ‘telling case’, allude not only to a demeaning, both deliberate and accidental, of Mitchell’s intentions but scholarship more generally. In particular, the disingenuous use of Mitchell to warrant a figurative ‘telling case’ is ethically problematic and contributes to the darkening cloud over any ‘telling case’. Of course, all five explanations, and the fact that so much material has been published on the back of such limited warrants, allude to a sixth explanation; that reviewers and editors are equally collusive in the maintenance of the ‘telling case’ as it so frequently presented. This collusion, if that is what it is, is disappointing because the ‘telling case’, as conceptualised by Mitchell, is much more than the myth it has become and retains the potential for enhancing our theoretical understanding of social phenomena. However, one must equally concede that the invisibility of the ‘telling case’ in mainstream anthropology, Mitchell’s home landscape, suggests either that researchers in that discipline have moved on from the Manchester School’s conception of case study (Gluckman, 1961; Mitchell, 1983) or that it was ahead of its time and is waiting to emerge from the shadows. (End page 465)

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Online appendix

Section 1: Uncited studies warranting the ‘telling case’ by means of the phrase “to make previously obscure theoretical relationships apparent”

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Section 3: Uncited studies warranting the ‘telling case’ by means of an edited version of Mitchell’s paragraph

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Section 4: Uncited studies warranted by extended summaries of Mitchell’s principles

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Section 5: Uncited studies warranting the 'telling case' by implicit reference to 'making visible theoretical connections'

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Section 6: Uncited studies warranting the 'telling case' by implicit reference to 'making visible new insights'

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