

Interdisciplinary Research: Case Studies From Health And Social Science

REVIEW ARTICLE

Methodology or method? A critical review of qualitative case study reports

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Abstract

Despite on-going debate about credibility, and reported limitations in comparison to other approaches, case study is an increasingly popular approach among qualitative researchers. We critically analysed the methodological descriptions of published case studies. Three high-impact qualitative methods journals were searched to locate case studies published in the past 5 years; 34 were selected for analysis. Articles were categorized as health and health services ($n = 12$), social sciences and anthropology ($n = 7$), or methods ($n = 15$) case studies. The articles were reviewed using an adapted version of established criteria to determine whether adequate methodological justification was present, and if study aims, methods, and reported findings were consistent with a qualitative case study approach. Findings were grouped into five themes outlining key methodological issues: case study methodology or method, case of something particular and case selection, contextually bound case study, researcher and case interactions and triangulation, and study design inconsistent with methodology reported. Improved reporting of case studies by qualitative researchers will advance the methodology for the benefit of researchers and practitioners.

Key words: Case studies, health research, research design, interdisciplinary research, qualitative research, literature review

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Case study research is an increasingly popular approach among qualitative researchers (Thomas, 2011). Several prominent authors have contributed to methodological developments, which has increased the popularity of case study approaches across disciplines (Creswell, 2013b; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011b; Merriam, 2009; Ragin & Becker, 1992; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009). Current qualitative case study approaches are shaped by paradigm, study design, and selection of methods, and, as a result, case studies in the published literature vary. Differences between published case studies can make it difficult for researchers to define and understand case study as a methodology.

Experienced qualitative researchers have identified case study research as a stand-alone qualitative approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011b). Case study research has a level of flexibility that is not readily offered by other qualitative approaches such as grounded theory or phenomenology. Case studies are designed to suit the case and research question and published case studies demonstrate wide diversity in

study design. There are two popular case study approaches in qualitative research. The first, proposed by Stake (1995) and Merriam (2009), is situated in a social constructivist paradigm, whereas the second, by Yin (2012), Flyvbjerg (2011), and Eisenhardt (1989), approaches case study from a post-positivist viewpoint. Scholarship from both schools of inquiry has contributed to the popularity of case study and development of theoretical frameworks and principles that characterize the methodology.

The diversity of case studies reported in the published literature, and on-going debates about credibility and the use of case study in qualitative research practice, suggests that differences in perspectives on case study methodology may prevent researchers from developing a mutual understanding of practice and rigour. In addition, discussion about case study limitations has led some authors to query whether case study is indeed a methodology (Luck, Jackson, & Usher, 2006; Meyer, 2001; Thomas, 2010; Tight, 2010). Methodological discussion of

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