Making a Case for the Case Study Method

Traditionally, nurses have been willing to step beyond the boundaries of conventional thought to explore new ways of providing care to improve patients’ lives. Nurse researchers need to share that same willingness to think outside the box and consider alternative methods of conducting research that will provide new insight into learning. Certain methods of qualitative research (e.g., phenomenology, ethnography, grounded theory) have gained acceptance among nurse researchers; yet using the case study as a research method has been seen as weak and less rigorous (Anthony & Jack, 2009). Although this misconception seems common among nurse researchers, case studies are frequently used in social science research, including psychology, sociology, anthropology, and education (Anthony & Jack, 2009; Bergen & While, 2000; Yin, 2003). According to Yin (2003), a case study is a research strategy that answers how and why questions, accommodates situations when the researcher has minimal control over the events, and requires a focus on phenomena that occur in a real-life context.

One of the most common misconceptions occurs due to researchers confusing the case study research method with the case study teaching method (Yin, 2003). A case study teaching method is specifically created to direct students to a particular conclusion, whereas the case study research method does not permit this type of manipulated scenario. The researcher seeks to report data from a real-life context in a truthful and unbiased manner. According to Yin (2003), six sources of evidence should be used in an exemplary case study. These sources of evidence may include researcher documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant observation, and physical artifacts. Photographs and videos are also acceptable sources.

Another common misconception occurs as a result of using a sampling logic to consider the robustness of the case study. Instead, multiple case studies are considered more robust due to replication logic (Yin, 2003). Using replication logic, each case study should be viewed as a single experiment. When the researcher identifies an important finding within a single case, the next step is to replicate this with more experiments. Each subsequent case study either predicts comparable results or predicts different results, but for expected reasons. According to Yin (2003), each study replicated within a multiple-case study increases the certainty of the results. The important outcome of this type of replication is the development or expansion of theories.

Many nursing research textbooks provide limited information regarding the case study method (Bergen & While, 2000; Burns & Grove, 2009; Polit & Beck, 2008); yet, it is a useful strategy in many potential areas of nursing education research. A case study design is useful when the researcher must take into account the contextual conditions of the phenomenon being studied. For example, a researcher seeking to understand how international service-learning influences cultural competence must consider how the context of the environment affects the phenomenon being studied.

A case study is particularly useful when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not easily distinguished. Traditionally, qualitative researchers tend to start with a blank slate (i.e., no established theory) when designing qualitative studies. Creswell (2007) clearly identified the case study as one of the five traditional qualitative methods, yet the case study allows for the prior development of theoretical propositions to direct the data collection and analysis (Yin, 2003). In this manner, the case study is particularly beneficial in supporting and expanding previously developed theories.

For nurse educators conducting evaluation research, case studies are probably the most useful. A case study “explains the presumed causal link in real-life interventions that are too complex for the survey or experimental strategies” (Yin, 2003, p. 15). This method allows the intervention to be described, illustrated, and explored in-depth using both quantitative and qualitative data.

A lack of familiarity with the case study method may contribute to the view that this design is a weak or less rigorous research strategy. In fact, such a view is not accurate. Construct validity is established by using multiple sources of evidence, maintaining a chain of evidence, and having a key informant review the draft of the case study report or through member checking. Internal validity is accomplished by pattern matching, explanation building, using logic models, or addressing rival explanations. External validity is maintained by using a theory in single-case studies or through replication logic in multiple-case studies. Reliability is ensured by establishing a case study protocol and developing a case
study database. On the basis of these common concepts of quality, case study research withstands the test of any empirical social research (Yin, 2003).

The case study research method warrants further inquiry and acceptance within the nursing community. Nurse researchers should regard it as a valid and reliable avenue for conducting research to improve nursing education. Nursing students should be introduced to this method during research courses and encouraged to consider the implications for studies that may improve patient care. Nurse researchers are innovative and should step outside traditional methods of nursing research to gain new insight into the process of learning and patient care.

**References**


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