Case-centered Research

5 Articles on the Purpose & Usefulness of a Case-centered Approach

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The contents of this compilation include a selection of 5 articles appearing in
Research Design Review from 2013 to 2023 concerning the case-centered research approach.
Excerpts and links may be used, provided that the proper citation is given.

Table of Contents

Lighting a Path to Guide Case-Centered Research Design: A Six-Step Approach

Elliot Mishler coined the term "case-centered research" to refer to the research approach that preserves the "unity and coherence" of research participants through the data collection and analysis process. Fundamental to case-centered research is its focus on complex social units (or "cases") in their entirety as well as the emphasis on maintaining the cohesiveness of the social unit(s) throughout the research process. **As discussed in this Research Design Review article**, two important examples of case-centered approaches are case study research and narrative research.

The complexity and need for cohesion in case-centered research present unique design challenges. Indeed, quality outcomes from case study and narrative research are the result of a well-defined process that guides the researcher from the initial conceptualization phase to data collecting in the field. Although the specifics within the process will vary from study to study, there exists an optimal design flow when implementing the case-centered research approach.

The appropriate path in case-centered designs, leading to data collection, involves the following six basic phases or steps*:

1. **Establishing priorities.** By establishing research priorities, the researchers contribute greatly to the ultimate "success" of the overall process as well as the final outcomes. The research team should identify priorities by addressing a series of questions such as, Are we only interested in a specific case or in using the case to say something more broadly about a larger population of cases? What is the role of theory development and the need for replication in conjunction with the research objective?

2. **Determining the need for and conducting a literature review.** A review of the literature can serve a very important function when the research focus is beyond the case itself, i.e., the goal is to extend, confirm, or deny existing theory or hypotheses. In this instance, a literature review helps form the theoretical framework that will steer design and implementation of the research, e.g., helping to identify the specific factors or variables that are closely associated with the research issue.

3. **Selecting a single case or multiple cases.** The research team may opt for a single case study, for example, when the focus of interest is on an isolated issue or entity, e.g., the physician-patient interaction at one city hospital or the lived experience of a victim of domestic violence. A multiple case approach, on the other hand, is appropriate when the objective of the research is to extend a theory or say something about the broader population segment, e.g., life stories from gifted students to understand the factors that contribute to their and similar students' drive to succeed.

4. **Determining the unit(s) and variable(s) of analysis.** There are two levels of specificity that researchers need to consider related to the data collection process: (1) the unit(s) of analysis represents the primary aspect of a case that will be the focus of investigation (e.g., gifted students' life stories) and (2) the variable(s) of analysis are subcategories within the units of analysis that guide researchers in their examination of the units (e.g., signs of creativity before and after the first grade in school).

5. **Identifying the appropriate methods.** Case-centered research utilizes multiple qualitative methods. Case study research frequently involves on-site observation (i.e., ethnography) and in-depth interviews (IDIs), while narrative research leans heavily on the unstructured IDI. Both, however, also incorporate other methods and data sources such as document reviews, imagery artifacts (e.g., students' completed exams), and video diaries.

6. **Preparing for the field.** There are a number of considerations that need to be addressed to prepare for data collection in the field. These include: developing the appropriate tools (e.g., IDI guide, observation grid); determining the role of each research team member; determining what, if any, problems exist in gaining access to the participants; obtaining informed consent; and initiating preliminary interaction with participants to begin building rapport.

* Adapted from Applied Qualitative Research Design: A Total Quality Framework Approach (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015. New York: Guilford Press)

Image captured from: https://afremov.com/THE-PATH-TO-VICTORY-PALETTE-KNIFE-Oil-Painting-On-Canvas-By-Leonid-Afremov-Size-36-X20.html

Multi-method & Case-centered Research: When the Whole is Greater Than the Sum of its Parts

Multi-method research enables the qualitative researcher to study relatively complex entities or phenomena in a way that is holistic and retains meaning. The purpose is to tackle the research objective from all the methodological sides. Rather than pigeonholing the research into a series of IDIs, focus groups, or observations, the multi-method approach frees the researcher into total immersion with the subject matter. Multi-method strategies are particularly relevant in case-centered research such as case studies and narrative research. For instance, a case study concerning a state-wide drug prevention program might include IDIs with the program staff and volunteers, observations of program activities, group discussions with program participants, and a review of administrative documents. Similarly, a narrative study to explore the manner in which 8th grade science is taught in the city schools might be designed to include many methods in order to frame the narrative environment such as: in-class teacher observations, teachers' lived stories captured by way of IDIs or autobiographical "essays," teachers' daily journal entries concerning classroom activities, and visual images of the classes in progress. Although a single method would provide insights on one aspect, it would fall short in giving the researcher a complete and realistic (i.e., broad and deep) picture of the drug-prevention program or 8th grade science. Yes, it is true that allowing science teachers to tell their stories would contribute important personal perspectives related to their teaching role, but this would ultimately deliver a shallow understanding compared to what the researcher could gain from enriching teachers' stories by way of input from other contexts (e.g., in-class observations and daily journals).

A multi-method approach such as case study and narrative research are differentiated from other qualitative methods in many ways, a few include:

- The focus of the research design is on the case itself – the subject of inquiry, such as the state's drug-prevention program or the teaching of 8th grade science – not the particular methods that are used to conduct the research.

- Each case in a case study or narrative research project is treated as a unit throughout all phases of the research. It is the case as an entity that is important to the researcher, not the categorical reduction of its elements.
- The subject matter and research objectives are typically complex. A case study of a non-profit organization, for instance, would have limited value if the qualitative researcher only explored one or two of the organization's programs in one geographic location.
- Likewise, case-centered research embraces the diversity of events, people, and circumstances that define a particular case.
- The elements that make up the entity of a case-centered study are interrelated. Case research investigating employment practices at a large manufacturing company, for instance, would use various methods to look at the connections between many factors, including staff training and attitudes, outreach efforts, employment policies and benefits, union versus non-union opportunities, plant versus office working conditions, and the job pool.

Not unlike a fine wine, the case in case-centered research is made up of a complex web of interrelated facets, where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Multi-method research examines these parts while not disturbing the whole.

The Strengths of Case-centered Research*

Case-centered research utilizes multiple qualitative methods to investigate multifaceted subject matter. Case-centered research "consists of two fundamental and unique components: (a) a focus on the investigation of 'complex' social units or entities (also known as 'case[s]') in their entirety (i.e., not just one aspect captured at one moment in time), and (b) an emphasis on maintaining the cohesiveness of this entity throughout the research process" (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015, p. 350). Two notable case-centered approaches are **case study** and **narrative research**.

Both case study and narrative research focus on complex phenomena and a holistic strategy to retain and give meaning to the many integrated components of the topic area under investigation. In so doing, these case-centered approaches tackle issues that **go beyond the scope of any one qualitative research method** such as **in-depth interviews (IDIs)** and **focus group discussions** to consider a case in the depth of its entirety.

For example, if the case concerns the use of technology at the university library, a case study research approach may surround the issue by going beyond onsite **observations**, IDIs, or group discussions with library users and staff, and incorporate a broader and more in-depth investigation, including (a) a complete review of the library's electronic databases; (b) the extent of users' access to Internet content (remotely and onsite); (c) the usability of its website across all digital devices, content, and amount of visitation; and (d) the use of and commitment to ongoing technological innovation. Similarly, narrative research to study the stigma of alcoholism would not be limited to IDIs with several alcoholics but would also embrace a full range of methods that attempt to look at the experience of living with alcoholism from different modes of communication, including orally via an unstructured IDI, in writing by way of a journal or diary exercise, and graphically in the form of a "self-identity drawing," asking the participant, "Could you try to draw who you think you are right now?" (Esteban-Guitart, 2012, p. 179). Narrative research provides the researcher with a complex dimensionality to participants' stories while also bestowing on participants the freedom to express their stories in varying ways and allowing their stories to be heard.

There is also a **"naturalness"** associated with case studies and narrative research. For case studies, this comes chiefly from the context or, more specifically, the researcher's

access to data taken from the subject's environment as it exists (e.g., the corporate environment to study the implementation of new employee training practices, a hospital's intensive care unit facility to study organizational structure, a two-block urban neighborhood to study social contact). Narrative research derives its naturalness from the unstructured, open-ended questioning—by which the interviewer's interjections in the interview are mostly words of encouragement (e.g., "Please, go on," or "Tell me what made that event so memorable") or questions for clarification (e.g., "Was this the first time you encountered this situation?" "How far is it from your home to where you go for treatment?")—as well as the idea that "humans are storytelling organisms" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2) and that telling stories is a natural aspect of what it means to be a human being. This natural basis from which to gather data enables the researcher to witness, among other things, the sequence of situational or life events as well as the changes that have taken place within the life cycle bounded by the case.

Connelly, F. M., & Clandinin, D. J. (1990). Stories of experience and narrative inquiry. *Educational Researcher*, *19*(5), 2–14.

Esteban-Guitart, M. (2012). Towards a multimethodological approach to identification of funds of identity, small stories and master narratives. *Narrative Inquiry*, *22*(1), 173–180. https://doi.org/10.1075/ni.22.1.12est

Roller, M. R., & Lavrakas, P. J. (2015). *Applied qualitative research design: A total quality framework approach*. New York: Guilford Press.

* A portion of this article is a modified excerpt from [Applied Qualitative Research Design: A Total Quality Framework Approach](#) (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015, pp. 306-307).

Ethical Considerations in Case-Centered Qualitative Research

The following is a modified excerpt from Applied Qualitative Research Design: A Total Quality Framework Approach (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015, pp. 304-305)

Case-centered qualitative research is discussed elsewhere in this blog (in particular, see **"Multi-method & Case-centered Research: When the Whole is Greater Than the Sum of its Parts"**). It is generally defined as multiple-method research that focuses on complex social units or entities (or "cases") in their entirety, while maintaining the cohesiveness of the entity throughout the research process rather than reducing the outcomes to categorical data. Two examples of case-centered research are: case studies – e.g., an examination of a city social program – and narrative research – e.g., a study of chronic illness among sufferers.

Ethical considerations are important in every research method involving human subjects but they take on added significance in case-centered research where researchers often work closely with research participants over a period of time and frequently in the face-to-face mode (where researcher-participant relationships play an important role in the research outcomes). Both case study and narrative research gather a great deal of highly detailed information on each case, e.g., a case study may collect a detailed account of a particular social program; or a narrative inquiry may result in long, very personal stories associated with a chronic illness. Beyond the ethical dilemma associated with drawing interpretations of narratives outside their temporal and social contexts (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2008), case-centered studies run the risk of inadvertently exposing participants' identities (without their permission) unless preventive measures are taken.

This is why the use of informed and voluntary consent as well as approval from institutional review boards (when required) is critical in case-centered research. Consent involves disclosing the various aspects of the research, emphasizing the voluntary component, promising to keep participants safe, and paying particular attention to vulnerable population segments (e.g., children). Yet these efforts need to go further. Case-centered researchers must also effectively communicate the confidential nature of the research and take extra precautions to ensure participants' right to privacy – which can be particularly challenging when

only one case is the focal point of the research (e.g., a city social program). For this reason, it is not uncommon for case study and narrative researchers to maintain participants' anonymity in their final reports by changing participants' names as well as the names of the characters and places revealed in the course of the research.

The path that these ethical considerations – consent and anonymity – take in the research design is also important. The skilled researcher will think carefully about how and when to incorporate these ethical standards while maintaining the quality and integrity of the data. For instance, narrative researchers are reluctant to reveal "too much" regarding the study objectives at the onset of an interview in fear of biasing the participant's narrative. The thinking tends to be that "the 'scholarly good' of framing the study in a way that makes possible the kind of narration the researcher needs outweighs the 'moral' good of telling the participant the exact nature of the study" (Josselson, 2007, p. 540). Many of these researchers balance the ethical obligation of informed consent with the need for quality outcomes by, among other things, gaining consent twice, i.e., before the interview and again at the completion of the interview, and by conducting a thoughtful debriefing with each participant.

Case-centered researchers also need to give thoughtful attention to anonymity and its impact on the final outcomes. Specifically, researchers must address questions such as: How will anonymizing the data introduce bias or error by way of changing context? and How will de-identifying the data alter its interpretation? These are important questions because the answers may determine how or *if* the data is used.

Ethical considerations revolve around transparency and safety, with safety broadly defined in terms of both physical and psychological harm, including the potential harm associated with the invasion of privacy and confidentiality. However, ethical considerations cannot (should not) be contemplated in a vacuum. Researchers – particularly case-centered researchers – need to carefully incorporate these ethics while also ensuring the quality of the research results.

Brinkmann, S., & Kvale, S. (2008). Ethics in qualitative psychological research. In C. Willig & W. Stainton-Rogers (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative psychology* (pp. 263–279). London: Sage Publications.

Josselson, R. (2007). The ethical attitude in narrative research: Principles and practicalities. In D. J. Clandinin (Ed.), *Handbook of narrative inquiry* (pp. 537–566). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Image captured from: http://digiday.com/platforms/anonymity-apps/

Case-Centered Research in Education: Bridging the Cultural Divide

*The following is a modified excerpt from **Applied Qualitative Research Design: A Total Quality Framework Approach** (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015, pp. 329-331). This excerpt discusses a case study illustrating how the author utilized many **Total Quality Framework** (TQF) design considerations, e.g., disclosure of the sampling method, a discussion of researcher bias, and processing plus verification procedures, that ultimately led to **useful outcomes**.*

*Multiple methods and case-centered qualitative research is the subject of other articles in Research Design Review – see **"Multi-method & Case-centered Research: When the Whole is Greater Than the Sum of its Parts."** Multiple methods, of course, refers to combining two or more qualitative methods to investigate a research question. Case-centered research is*

A term coined by Mishler (1996, 1999) to denote a research approach that preserves the "unity and coherence" of research subjects throughout data collection and analysis. It consists of two fundamental and unique components: (a) a focus on the investigation of "complex" social units or entities (also known as "case[s]") in their entirety (i.e., not just one aspect captured at one moment in time), and (b) an emphasis on maintaining the cohesiveness of this entity throughout the research process. Two prominent case-centered approaches are case study research and narrative research. (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015, p. 350).

*The following case study is from Auerbach (2002) who used multiple methods within a case-centered narrative study design to explore schooling and communication with educators among working-class Latino parents in urban Los Angeles. This case is discussed around the four components of the TQF – **Credibility**, **Analyzability**, **Transparency**, and **Usefulness**.*

Purpose

The purpose of this research was to explore the problems that Latino parents in urban Los Angeles face related to the schooling of their children and communication with educators. More specifically, this research utilized one particular college-access program for high school students to investigate the use of storytelling among a marginalized group of working-class Latino parents to examine whether "listening to the stories of parents of color may help urban educators and policy makers bridge the divide between students' home cultures and the culture of school" (p. 1370).

Method

A case-centered approach is a popular form of qualitative research among educational researchers. Stake (1995), Qi (2009), Bennett et al. (2012), Clandinin and Connelly (1998; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990), and Randall (2012) are just a few of the researchers who have applied either case

study or narrative research to issues in education. The study presented here is another example of case-centered research in an educational setting. This was a fitting approach, given the researcher's access to and involvement with the "Futures Project"—a longitudinal study conducted in conjunction with an experimental college-access program for high school students—which fostered a case-centered study design relying on multiple methods within a narrative framework.

DESIGN

Credibility
Scope
The target population for this study was parents of high school students participating in the Futures Project. This project was conducted in partnership with UCLA to trace the trajectories of 30 students who participated in an experimental college-access program. The researcher used this population to draw a purposive sample consisting of 16 Latino or Black parents who were selected because of their diversity in race/ethnicity, educational attainment, English fluency, as well their students' grade point average (GPA) and gender. All 16 parents cooperated with the research. The researcher acknowledges that this sample was not representative of the target population but emphasizes that the goal was not to generalize but to build on critical race and sociocultural theory. Among the 16 parents who participated in this study, the researcher selected four Latino parents to further analyze; these parents are the focus of this paper. These four individuals were chosen because their stories stood out as "signature pieces" that expressed many of the concerns of other Futures parents, offering particular insight into family–school relations (which was a key research objective). The researcher admits that the four selected parents were not representative of the target population; indeed, they were better educated, more articulate, and more fluent in English compared to other parents. These parents did, however, represent a range in the "Latino immigration experience" and conveyed "struggles" similar to those expressed by others.

Data Gathering
This case-centered research involved a series of in-depth interviews (IDIs), conducted by the researcher in English and Spanish, over a 3-year period. In this same time period, the researcher also completed participant observations involving "family–

school interactions" and program activities (e.g., conferences, fairs), as well as analyzed Futures program data such as school documents, transcripts from parent meetings, and student interviews.

The researcher acknowledges the potential for researcher bias in the study design. In particular, she points to the fact that she was a **complete participant observer** whose participation in events may have potentially biased the data (although she utilized a **reflexive journal**, peer debriefings, and member checks to remain mindful of this possibility). The researcher also concedes that her status as a White, middle-class woman potentially made her an outsider to the working-class Latino parents in this study, which may have hampered gaining candid input and/or her ability to truly understand these parents' concerns from their perspectives.

Analyzability
Processing
The researcher showed flexibility by embracing an iterative approach to data collection and analysis, with one informing the other simultaneously and throughout the fieldwork.

All IDIs conducted in the 3-year period were recorded and transcribed verbatim in English and Spanish. The researcher also used field notes; however, she does not state whether these notes were transcribed. Transcriptions of the parents' meetings were also available.

The researcher used several aids to identify themes across individual cases while attempting to maintain the entirety of the single case, including case summaries and data displays. The researcher "scrutinized" the IDI transcripts along with the transcripts from the parents' meetings. The researcher used "narrative analysis"; however, it is not made explicit what this analysis entailed.

Parents' stories were analyzed from various perspectives: topically, theoretically, and in vivo codes (direct use of parents' words).

The researcher derived three "distinct narrative genres" from the data: (1) parents' life stories of their own struggles with school, (2) stories of being rebuffed by the school staff, and (3) counter-stories that challenged the status quo of the bureaucratic system.

Verification
The researcher used multiple verification techniques that included **triangulation** (i.e., comparing and contrasting data from the various methods), peer debriefings (i.e., discussions with research colleagues during the field period concerning her subjectivity), member checks (i.e., discussing her findings with parents), prolonged engagement in the field (i.e., 3 years), and reflexive memos.

Transparency
The researcher does not provide sufficient detail (e.g., the interview guide, the **observation grid** [if there was one], the documents reviewed, the data displays, or transcriptions) to enable another researcher to transfer the design to another context with a high degree of confidence. However, much of the research paper is devoted to the three genres of stories emerging from the research data, including commentary and interpretation of each story type as well as excerpts from parents' stories and relevant details in the analysis, which help to give the reader a real sense of the basis by which the researcher isolated these three classes of stories. Other researchers should find these details useful in investigating marginalized groups in similar school environments. Her coverage also provides an engaging report format. Although not included in this paper, the researcher strongly suggests that an audit trail of the research findings as well as a thick description were provided in her final document.

Usefulness
This research adds to the knowledge of family–school relations among marginalized groups and of the impact narratives can have in improving the former and empowering the latter. The researcher discusses three specific ways that narratives can have a positive impact as well as the implication for policy makers and educators. As far as a next step, the researcher suggests that additional research be conducted to examine whether the three narrative genres are "common" among parents of color.

Auerbach, S. (2002). "Why do they give the good classes to some and not to others?" Latino parent narratives of struggle in a college access program. *Teachers College Record*, *104*(7), 1369–1392. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9620.00207

Bennett, S., Bishop, A., Dalgarno, B., Waycott, J., & Kennedy, G. (2012). Implementing Web 2.0 technologies in higher education: A collective case study. *Computers & Education*, *59*(2), 524–534. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2011.12.022

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Image captured from: https://tcf.org/content/report/how-racially-diverse-schools-and-classrooms-can-benefit-all-students/