

Systematic case study research in psychotherapy: principles and methods

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Overview introductory lecture/ discussion

- Introduction: thinking about case studies
- Why are case studies important?
- Epistemological issues
- Ethical issues
- The search for a method of *systematic* (i.e., rigorous, valid) case study research
- Four 'genres' of systematic case study research
- Some underlying principles
- Some unresolved methodological issues
- Team-base case study research

Why are case studies important in psychotherapy theory and practice?

- It is possible to understand psychotherapy in terms of many different units of analysis: speaking turn, significant event within a session, a whole session...
- For practitioners, the *case* represents a fundamental unit of analysis: we work with 'cases'
- But: each individual practitioner only encounters a limited number of cases within his/her career
- Published cases enhance the repertoire of possibilities open to the practitioner

Key sources on justifying the importance of case study research in psychotherapy

Fishman, D.B. (1999) *The Case for a Pragmatic Psychology*. New York: New York University Press

Miller, R.B. (2004) *Facing human suffering: psychology and psychotherapy as moral engagement*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. (chapter 6)

Introductory exercise: in what ways have case studies influenced your own practice as a therapist?

- Personal self-exploration
- Take a few moments to reflect, and write brief notes
- Identify three **published** cases that have influenced the way that you think about therapy, and work with clients
- For each case, note down ***what you have learned from the case***

My influential cases

Carl Rogers: Gloria video – learned about empathy

An "Incurable" Schizophrenic: The Case of Mr. X,
by *Bertram P. Karon, Pragmatic Case Studies in
Psychotherapy, Vol 4, No 1 (2008)* – learned
about flexibility and making a safe place

Several White and Epston 'narrative therapy'
cases – learned about how to make use of
cultural/social resources

What kind of knowledge is generated by case studies?

- A good case study:
 - Captures complexity
 - based on multiple sources of information
 - explores the interaction between different processes or factors
 - Describes and analyses how processes and events unfold over time
 - Tells a story
 - Takes account of context

Epistemological issues in case study research

1. Generalisability

- Is it possible to generalise from a case study?
- How is it possible to design/write a case study so that the information it contains can be generalised to other cases?

Epistemological issues in case study research

2. Causality

- Is it possible to make causal statements on the basis of case study data?
- How is it possible to analyse case material to allow causal processes/links to be demonstrated?

Recommended reading on methodological issues

Flybjerg, B. (2006) Five misunderstandings about case-study research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 12(2): 219-245

Ethical issues in case study research

Exercise: exploring the ethics of case study research

- Imagine that you are a client who has completed long-term therapy with a therapist who you like and respect
- This is the final review session, at the end of therapy
- Your therapist says that he/she wishes to write up your case for publication, and is asking for your approval
- What are the thoughts, feelings, questions, fantasies etc that you experience on hearing this request?

What are the ethical issues associated with case study research? How can they be addressed?

- Informed consent
- Confidentiality
- Avoidance of harm

Some ethical principles for case study research in counselling/psychotherapy

1. Prospective informed consent for in-principle case study participation should be obtained from clients before the commencement of therapy, and then at all further stages of the inquiry cycle up to and including the final release to publish (*process consent*).
2. The person who undertakes the informed consent procedure should not be the therapist conducting the case.
3. In situations where prospective informed consent is not feasible (e.g., decision to conduct a case study made following commencement of therapy), alternative consent procedures must be approved by an appropriate institutional approval committee or board, or an equivalent consultative group, and include the involvement of an independent consultant who will undertake all negotiations with the client.
4. In situations where informed consent is not possible (e.g., the client is not contactable) at least two independent expert consultants should audit all aspects of the inquiry process, as advocates of the client.
5. Good practice in case study research involves providing the client with an opportunity to comment on a draft of the case report, and to stipulate the deletion or disguising of material for confidentiality purposes. Good practice involves encouraging the client to make a personal statement about the case report, to be included in the final published version.

Recent developments in case study methods

A short history of psychotherapy case study research

- Freud – psychoanalysis
- Case material based on recall of therapist
- Highly interpretive analysis (by single researcher....who is also a participant)
- Compelling literary/detective style of writing
- Easy to criticise – Donald Spence
 - Narrative smoothing
 - Narrative truth vs historical truth
- BUT – has produced a highly generative and resilient form of knowledge for practice

Beyond clinical case studies: the search for a systematic approach to case study research in psychotherapy

- Aim: to enhance the validity and credibility of case study evidence
- Four traditions/genres of systematic psychotherapy case study research have emerged in recent years:
 - Pragmatic case studies
 - Efficacy-oriented case studies
 - Theory-building case studies
 - Narrative/qualitative case studies

The aims of case study research

- *Outcome questions:* How effective has therapy been in this case? To what extent can changes that have been observed in the client be attributed to therapy?
- *Theory-building questions:* How can the process of therapy in this case be understood in theoretical terms? How can the data in this case be used to test and refine an existing theoretical model?
- *Pragmatic questions:* What strategies and methods did the therapist use in this case, that contributed to the eventual outcome? How were therapeutic methods adapted and modified to address the needs of this specific client? What are the principles of good practice that can be derived from this case?
- *Experiential or narrative questions.* What was it like to be the client or therapist in this case? What is the story of what happened, from the client or therapist point of view?

Pragmatic single case research

- Fishman – case study as basic paradigm for the creation of practical knowledge
- Create large database of practitioner-generated single case studies
- *Pragmatic Case Studies in Psychotherapy* – on-line journal
- Simple, standard protocol
- Case study is published with commentaries
- Implications for therapy training and accreditation: students should produce publishable pragmatic case studies

Pragmatic Case Studies in Psychotherapy

Article sub-headings:

1. Case Context
2. The Client
3. Guiding Conception with Research and Clinical Experience Support
4. Assessment of the Client's Problems, Goals, Strengths, and History.
5. Formulation and Treatment Plan
6. Course of Therapy
7. Therapy Monitoring and Use of Feedback Information
8. Concluding Evaluation of the Process and Outcome of the Therapy
9. References
10. Tables (optional)
11. Figures (optional)

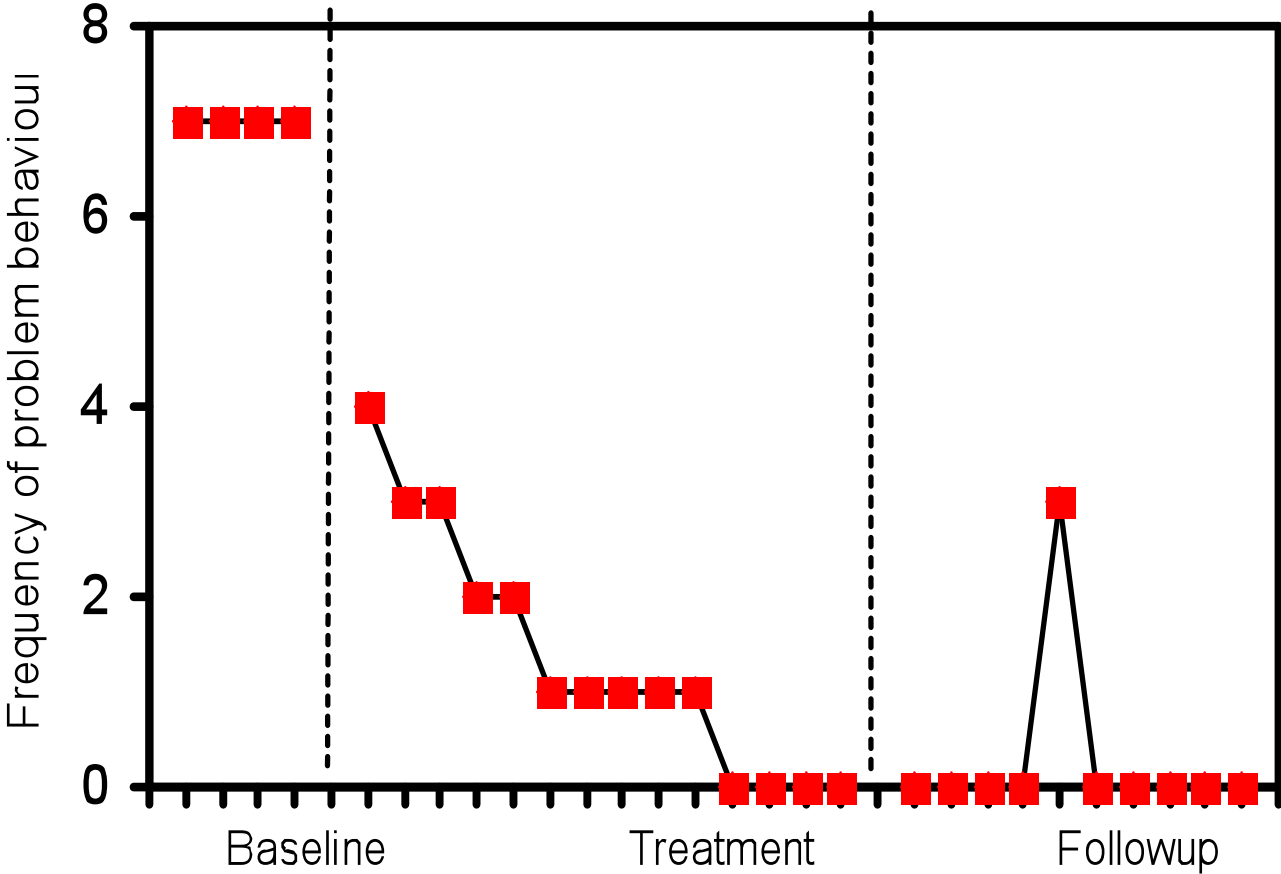
Efficacy/effectiveness-oriented case studies

- Aim: to demonstrate or evaluate the effectiveness of an intervention or therapy approach
- Often used as a preliminary to running a larger (extensive) study
- Two types of efficacy-oriented case study:
 - “n=1”, “single subject” designs (widely used in behaviour therapy and CBT research)
 - Hermeneutic Single Case Efficacy Design (HSCED) – developed by Robert Elliott

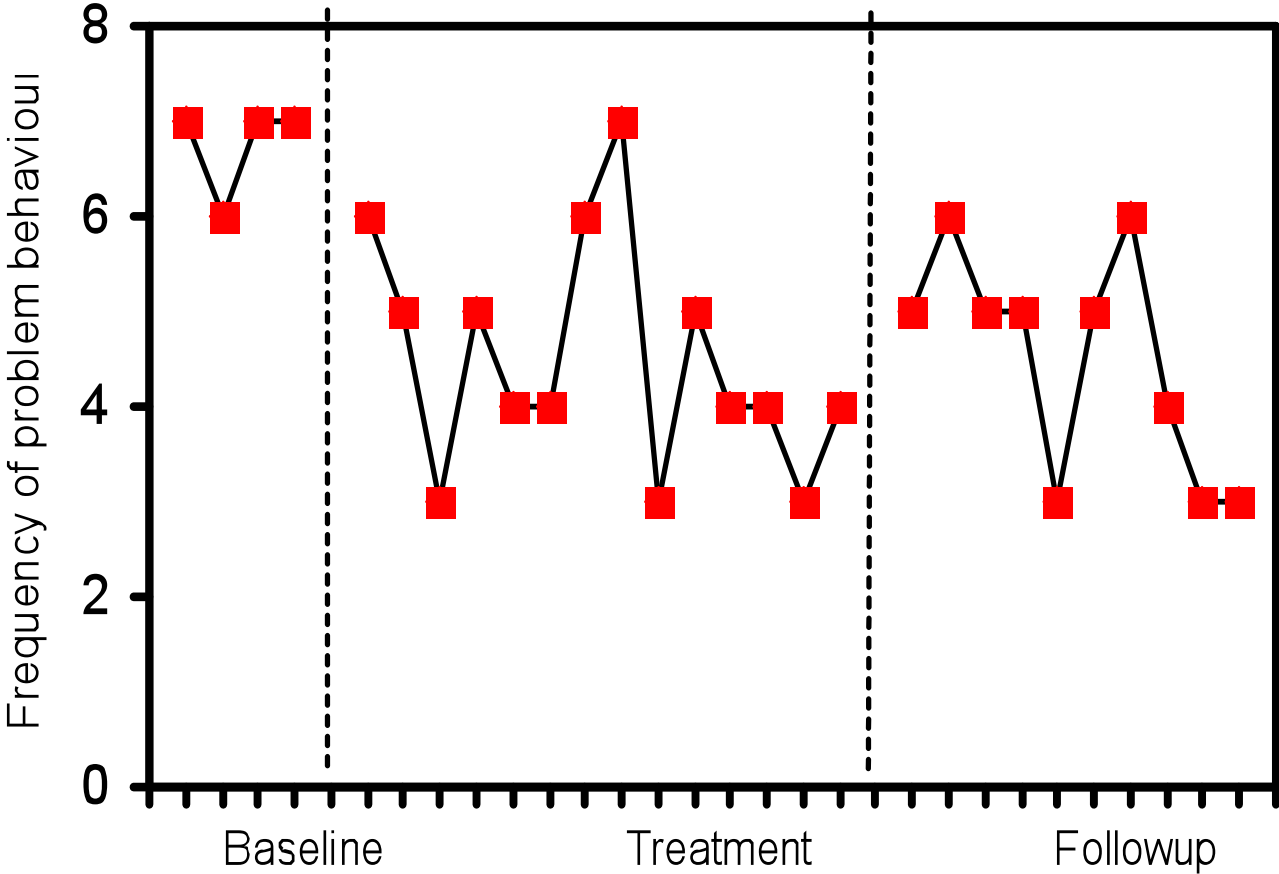
N=1 single subject designs

- Widely used in behavioural/CBT research
- Relies on time-series analysis
- Baseline and repeated measures
- Measures selected/designed to be sensitive to specific client problem(s)

Simple A-B time-series design: good outcome case



Simple A-B time-series design: ambiguous outcome case



N=1 time-series designs

- Rhetorical framework: graph plus narrative
- Excellent way of demonstrating the effectiveness of new interventions
- But: not perceived as relevant by therapy researchers who are reluctant to reduce outcome to one (or a few) objective measures

An alternative efficacy design: HSCED (Hermeneutic Single Case Efficacy Design – Robert Elliott)

- Construct a rich data set on each case:
 - Outcome measures
 - Process measures
 - Therapy session recordings
 - Post-therapy change interview
- Systematically interpret the evidence to evaluate two contrasting conclusions:
 - A. This is a good outcome case and the outcomes can be attributable to therapy
 - B. Not a good outcome case or changes can be explained by non-therapy factors
- Arrive at final, reasoned conclusion

The quasi-judicial approach to interpreting case data

- Basic assumption: the legal system has evolved rigorous methods for deciding on the relative validity of competing interpretations of cases
- Originally applied in personality research: Murray, Bromley, DeWaele
- Used in psychotherapy research by Elliott, Bohart
- Key ideas:
 - Rules for adjudicating between alternative explanations (“case lore”)
 - Use external judges to decide on competing arguments
 - Arrive at single consensus view

Issues to consider when considering nontherapy explanations for outcome in a case study (i.e., making a case that therapy was not effective)

- Nonimprovement:
 - apparent changes are *trivial*
 - apparent changes are *negative*.
- Statistical artefacts:
 - Apparent changes reflect measurement error
 - Apparent changes reflect outliers, or regression to the mean
 - Apparent change is due to experimenter error (e.g., adoption of a ‘fishing expedition’ strategy to data analysis).
- Relational artefacts: apparent changes are superficial attempts to please the researcher or therapist.
- Apparent changes are a result of client expectations or wishful thinking.
- Self-correction: apparent changes are the result of self-help or self-limiting easing of short-term or temporary problems.
- Apparent changes are due to extratherapy events (e.g., a new relationship or new job).
- Psychobiological factors: apparent changes can be attributed to medication or herbal remedies, or recovery from medical illness.
- Apparent changes can be attributed to reactive effects of research, including contact with research staff.
- Source: Elliott, R. (2002) Hermeneutic single-case efficacy design. *Psychotherapy Research*, 12: 1-23.

Using case research to test/
elaborate theory (“theory-building
case studies”)

“...in any scientific research, observations change theories. They may confirm or disconfirm or strengthen or weaken the theory. More constructively, the changes may involve extending, elaborating, refining, modifying or qualifying the theory...observations *permeate* the theory... Thus, a theory is not a fixed formula, but a growing and changing way of understanding” (Stiles, 2007: 123).

“...researchers who have conducted intensive, in-depth case studies typically report that their preconceived views, assumptions, concepts, and hypotheses were wrong and that the case material has compelled them to revise their hypotheses on essential points” (Flyvbjerg, 2006: 235).

Theory-building case studies: recent examples

- Stiles: assimilation model
- Dreier: social practice theory
- McLeod: narrative processes in therapy
- Keinanen: concept of psychosemiosis
- Hill: 'immediacy' case series

Narrative case studies

- qualitative inquiry that seeks to allow the client and/or the therapist to tell his or her story
- example: work of Kim Etherington
- key research questions:
 - ‘what does therapy mean to a client or therapist, in the context of his or her life as a whole?’
 - ‘how do we understand the richness of how a particular case unfolds?’

**Some emerging methodological
guidelines for systematic case
study research in psychotherapy**

Some tentative guidelines for psychotherapy case-based research studies

- Choose an interesting case – one with news value
- Create as rich a data set as possible, based on multiple sources of information
- As far as possible, quantitative measures should be both specific (tailored to the particular problems reported by the client – e.g., the Personal Questionnaire) and general (to allow comparison with norms – e.g., CORE)
- Tell the story
- Provide enough information so that the reader can make up their own mind
- Use multiple analysts, rather than depending on a single perspective on the data
- Do some kind of time series analysis, to explore causal linkages
- Critically examine alternative interpretations of the data – be critical and scholarly, rather than using the case study to “sell” your approach to therapy
- Take theory seriously – remember that generalisation is grounded in the establishment of cross-case theoretical principles
- Try to find out what the client thinks about the therapy they have received, and about your analysis of the case
- Provide as much information as possible about the context
- Be reflexive - provide relevant information about the author(s)
- Use a standard format (e.g., PCSP), to make it easier for future scholars to conduct meta-analyses, and for current readers to read it
- Get the ethics right – if possible seek permission from the start. Be prepared to “lose” interesting cases on ethical grounds.

Some unresolved/ongoing methodological issues

- Ethical guidelines
- Taking account of the views of the participant/client
- Taking account of the experience of the therapist (counter-transference)
- How to write good case studies
- The relevance of the wider case study tradition in social science research
- Meta-analysis: how do we interpret the results of accumulated case studies?

Team-based case study research by practitioners or students ('case study inquiry groups')

- Group of 4/5 students/practitioners convene to conduct a case study (on own data or a case from an archive)
- Members of the group take different roles (e.g., interacting with the client, reviewing the literature, collecting data, writing, sceptic/affirmative etc)
- Group meetings include time for reflection on personal and professional issues arising from the project
- A valuable supplement to supervision and continuing professional development
- Allows first-hand involvement in data collection and analysis – de-mystifies the research process
- Make a contribution to the research literature

Case study inquiry groups: models for how groups can function

- Quasi-judicial (e.g., HSCED)
- Consensual Qualitative Research (Clara Hill)
- Collaborative inquiry (Peter Reason)
- Ward method

Further reading

McLeod, J. (2010) Case study research in counselling and psychotherapy. London: Sage.