Case studies

Lesson 2.1.4 | AS research methodology

Core ideas

Case studies focus on one individual, group or situation in much more detail than many other methods.

They often combine evidence from interviews, observations, tests, documents or background history.

Rich qualitative data can reveal unusual behaviour, rare conditions or complex real-life experiences.

Triangulation strengthens a case study by comparing evidence from more than one source or technique.

Case studies can have low generalisability because one case may not represent a wider population.

Evaluation should consider depth, validity, researcher bias, ethics, confidentiality and difficulty repeating the research.

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Key terms

Case study: An in-depth investigation of one person, group, organisation or situation.

Qualitative data: Non-numerical data such as descriptions, explanations or interview comments.

Triangulation: Using more than one source or method to check evidence.

Generalisability: How far findings apply beyond the case studied.

Researcher bias: When a researcher's expectations influence interpretation.

Confidentiality: Protecting private information about participants.

Validity: How accurately research measures or represents what it claims to study.

Longitudinal evidence: Information collected over an extended period of time.

Further detail and evidence

A case study investigates one participant or defined unit in detail; the unit may be a person, family or organisation. It can combine interviews, observations, tests and documents. Triangulation compares different evidence, rather than simply collecting several copies of the same account.

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Applying the ideas

Saavedra and Silverman combined the boy's history, child/parent interviews, observed button contact, distress ratings and follow-ups. Improved approach alongside initially rising distress showed why one measure could miss an important change. One case can generate a hypothesis for later controlled testing.

Worked example: Use a case-study method to investigate a rare phobia, and describe two sources of data. A psychologist could investigate one person with a rare phobia using interviews to gather the person's own account of fear, triggers and history. The psychologist could also use observations or rating scales during controlled exposure to record visible anxiety responses. Using more than one source would give richer evidence and support triangulation.

Worked example: Assess one strength and one limitation of case studies. A strength of case studies is depth because they can collect detailed qualitative information about a complex person or situation. A limitation is low generalisability because one case may not represent other people or contexts. This means case studies can be very informative, but conclusions should be made carefully.

Evaluation and connections

Rich contextual detail supports understanding of an unusual case, but researcher interpretation and selective recall can affect validity. One case need not represent a population. Detailed publication can reveal identity even without a name; protect privacy and obtain appropriate consent. Repeating the unique life history exactly is usually impossible.