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# A Case for Case Studies in Social Work Research

Jane F. Gilgun

*Case study research is a good fit with many forms of social work practice. Although disparaged as uncontrolled and uninterpretable, the case study has great potential for building social work knowledge for assessment, intervention, and outcome. This article defines case study research, presents guidelines for evaluating case studies, and shows the relevance of case studies to social work research. Guidelines for evaluation also are guidelines for developing and interpreting case studies that will meet the rigorous demands of scientific research and be useful to social work practitioners.*

**Key Words:** case study; evaluation; guidelines; practice; research

The case study is a neglected and maligned approach to social work research. Rejected more for how uninformed researchers have used it and less for flaws intrinsic to its nature, the case study is compatible with many forms of social work practice and policy research. Although case studies are not useful for estimating prevalence rates or for probabilistic generalization, they are useful to study problems in depths, to understand the stages in processes, or to understand situations in context (Greene & David, 1984; Yin, 1989). Other practice professions such as medicine, law, and business have long used case studies for research and teaching. Case studies have provided the basis for the development of psychotherapy (Kazdin, 1981), for the science of cognitive development as pioneered by Piaget (1951, 1952, 1954), and the science of human behavior (Garmezy, 1982). The foundation work for family therapy and family sociology was based on case studies (Gilgun, Daly, & Handel, 1992; Handel, 1991).

This article defines the case study, presents guidelines for evaluating case studies, and shows

the relevance of case studies to social work research. The guidelines for evaluation also provide guidelines for developing and interpreting case studies. The application of these guidelines will result in case studies that meet the rigorous standards of scientific research and are useful to social work practitioners.

## Background

### Definitions

**Case Study.** The case study is an intensive investigation of a single unit (Handel, 1991; Runyan, 1982; Yin, 1989). Most case studies involve the examination of multiple variables. The interaction of the unit of study with its context is a significant part of the investigation. Examples include life history research on individual lives in context and "thick description" (Geertz, 1973, p. 6) ethnographies of social settings. Thickly described case studies take multiple perspectives into account and attempt to understand the influences of multilayered social systems on subjects' perspectives and behaviors. However, some case

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