The power of the case study within practice, education and research

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ABSTRACT

The case study method is a popular pedagogical tool within social work education. It is, however, unclear if individual organisations, students, practitioners and academics have fully appraised the value and power of the case study beyond research activities. This article describes a critical reflection exercise into the functionality of the case study method. It presents the themes from a co-operative inquiry conducted by six professionals with experience in social work field education. This professional collaboration, informed by the authors' practice knowledge, considers how the case study enhances practice, education, research and personal and professional development within an organisational context. Emerging key themes indicate that the case study method is not confined to research and that it can also be extensively applied within field education and industry. A case study can be a powerful learning tool sparking empathy, providing context to situations, allowing people to connect to social phenomena intellectually and emotionally, counterbalancing efficiency-driven environments and enabling ethical practice. The inquiry concludes that, when applying the case study, it is important to be reflexive and reflective in utilising the method, and to elicit the humanity of a situation respectfully.

INTRODUCTION

This study is a co-operative inquiry into the functions, value and power of the case study. It aims to reflect critically on the case study method as a didactic tool utilised in, and beyond, research. Additionally it encourages students, workers and academics to be "thinking, doing and being" professionals when engaging with case studies. A co-operative inquiry methodology collects co-authors' practice wisdom and knowledge about an inquiry area. This inquiry provides an opportunity to review the functionality of case studies through an alternative lens – one valuing reflexivity. The purpose of this inquiry is to consider the research question what do we (the authors, through our experience in field education, practice and research) perceive to be case study functions? This includes considering themes such as what a case study is and why it is valuable; and how the case study approach enhances practice, education, research, personal and professional development and/or knowledge within an organisational or human services sector's context.

Three industry-based social workers with experience in work-based learning, also known as field education, initiated this project. They proposed an experiential research and professional development opportunity which drew out themes common to various human service sector workplaces, made strong connections between theory and practice, and facilitated reflective and reflexive thinking. An industry and university research collaboration formed with five human services practitioners and one academic. We recognised, through this collaboration, that we utilised individual and collective case studies, sometimes with minimal contemplation, for diverse reasons in a variety of contexts. It was unclear to us if our organisations, or others, have critically appraised the functions, value and power of the case study across its numerous applications within industry. It appeared to us that literature more often commentates on one application of the case study, which is its usefulness as a research method. In contrast, we present a broad spectrum of application, one authentically reflecting our wide usage of the case study method across practice and academia. This paper outlines our personal experiences of applying the case study within the human services sector.

The Case Study

The case study draws upon testimonies, narratives, professional knowledge and/or experiences, allowing reflexivity and reflection to occur. It is widely applied within the human services sector, social work education and research by practitioners, managers, students and academics. Its amorphous nature necessitates a broad understanding of the case study method, one that includes and extends beyond research methods.

The case study is acknowledged for its strength as a research method (for example, Alston & Bowles, 2013) partly due to its flexibility. Within education or training it is recognised as a: supervision technique for students and staff (for example, Agllias et al., 2010); teaching method (Pawar, 2004); a performance and development activity; and a training and quality assurance feedback mechanism (for example, Australian Public Service Commission, 2012). Within practice, the case study is a: practice reflection activity (for example, Healy, 2014; Jones-Mutton, 2011); summary of clinical interactions, case notes and/or data mining (for example, Budgell, 2008; Jones & Russell, 2008); recruitment strategy (Victorian Government Youth Central, 2014); funding application technique (*The Guardian*, 2016); promotional

activity (for example, Myer Foundation, 2016); critical incident, crisis and risk management tool (for example, AHC Media, 2016).

The case study can be a useful exploratory approach (Short, 2015) for through it an intentional, in-depth learning context arises (Jones & Russell, 2008). A strength of the case study is it allows an exchange of meaning to occur. This meaning provides context to quantitative data and also to situations experienced by people such as the briefing and debriefing of actions. Such exchanges encourage "doing, thinking and being" by practitioners, students, teachers and researchers (Pawar & Anscombe, 2015).

This co-operative inquiry began as a conversation between five industry leaders who supervise social work students within a variety of work environments and one academic. A co-operative inquiry is a participatory, democratic, inclusive and potentially emancipatory qualitative research methodology (Bridges & McGee, 2010). It involves collecting a variety of resources such as literature about a focal area, inquirers' narratives about their experiences of that area and relevant general information (Short & Healy, 2017). The inquirers meet regularly and discuss this collection, also known as data, and repeatedly cycle over the data until key themes emerge which can inform practice (Short & Healy, 2017). We chose this methodology for this research project because it would describe the power of the case study in and beyond research activities, as well as generate knowledge. What ensued from the inquiry was an amalgamation of our thoughts about the disparate reasons for when and why the case study is used.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Two centuries after Fredrick Le Play's pioneering work, the case study continues to be widely utilised within the human services and other sectors (Gerring, 2007). This is because the case study method has many strengths, such its ability to outline both content and processes for a situation, extend practice, aid practical deliberation and assist reflection about events or information (Wall, 2006). The Harvard Business School, as an example, has utilised cases as an educational and knowledge generating tool for discussion and analysis since around 1870 (Jones, 2005; Jones & Russell, 2008).

In a research environment, Yin (2014) argues a case study investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the case) in a real life context. In other environments, like social work field education and practice, a strength is its ability to demonstrate particular points about a situation more effectively (Yin, 2014).

The case study method, in research and other environments, may involve investigating a single case (Swanborn, 2010, p. 14). In this situation the method's strength is its ability to emphasise one phenomenon such as an individual, household or family's circumstances (Radley & Chamberlain, 2011). Alternatively, the case study may involve investigating multiple (collective or comparative) studies about a general phenomenon (Silverman, 2010; Swanborn, 2010). In this situation, the collective case study's strength is its ability to compare and contrast a set of paradigms (Zucker, 2009); and to accommodate multiple variables and sources of evidence (Yin, 2014).

Navigating ethical issues when working with the case study in practice and academia is necessary. For example, de-identifying a story with the altruistic aim of protecting the confidentiality of an individual (Silverman & Patterson, 2015) can potentially make a case study vulnerable to bias. The anonymising process risks diluting the experience being considered and also disconnecting the person and their situation from the process.

Another dilemma is related to a recognised strength of the case study, that is its element of contextualisation. When exploring a case study we need to be clear about to what contexts we are connecting our reflections, analysis, interpretations and reporting (Crowe et al., 2011), such as deciding if it is research or client work and thus ensuring our own personal or organisational context does not encrypt the analysis.

Reflexivity assists in navigating such ethical dilemmas by ensuring people are cognisant of their biases and preferences (Silverman & Patterson, 2015). Reflexivity can inform the de-identifying process and our connections to the case study processes (Silverman & Patterson, 2015).

Our interrogation of the literature found that the case study within a research context has been extensively described and often carefully critiqued. For example, it is described as "the imagination of the person doing the case study" (Simon, 2009, p. 206). Some are circumspect about utilising the case study, their critiques arguing it contains non-generalised theories, biased case selection, informal and undisciplined designs, subjective conclusions, non-replicability, and causal determinism (Gerring, 2007). Others believe the case study can become uncontrollable, uninterpretable, incoherent (Saldanha & O'Brien, 2013), under-developed, complicated (Yin, 2009), and unable to capture the intricacies of real life (Bernard, 2012). We felt it would be helpful to remember these critiques when applying the case study beyond research, such as in field education.

We also noticed that, over the last few decades, the literature appears to classify the case study sometimes as a qualitative method (Yin, 2014), and at other times as a method generating quantitative data (Thomas, 2011). The literature, however, does not always seem to emphasise its intentional conversational aspects such as in practice, nor the range of the case study functions, power and usefulness. Our exploration of the literature led us to realise that there appears to be a dearth of critique about how the case study can be presented through a variety of modes of communication including multimedia display, paperless and/or on paper.

Our co-operative inquiry group was conscious of the gaps in the literature and that these gaps appeared to be due to the extant literature often focusing on research at the expense of other applications. Extensive analysis and discussion convinced us that the case study, when used in a structured way in research (as well as in social work education or the workplace), can lead to powerful and valuable insights about process. It can encourage or initiate changes within individuals, organisations and practice alongside research (Zucker, 2009). In this inquiry we decided, in contrast to some literature, to adopt a wide and inclusive definition, which is to consider the case study to be a valuable in-depth examination of a case (or cases) within a real-life context (Crowe et al., 2011; Yin, 2014). We also suggest it is important for human service sector workers, and potential workers, to be "thinking, doing and being"

professionals or students who are reflexive and reflective in how they apply the case study within their environment.

Reflective and reflexivity exercise

Reflection and reflexivity are amorphous terms, theorised and defined in many ways (Adamson, 2011). They are sometimes used interchangeably and at other times seen as two different concepts (Gray, 2007). This project's inquirers perceive these concepts as different, complementary and resources for underpinning conversations about the power and value of the case study.

Critical reflection is a key mechanism in critical thinking, facilitating growth and change (Fook & Askeland, 2007; Forneris & Peden-McAlpine, 2016). Reflection is a conscious bringing to the surface of different forms of knowledge, while attending to the thoughts and emotions present within the student or practitioner during and after the experience (Davys & Beddoe, 2009). Reflection is not intuitive and those reflecting benefit from a clear, structured facilitation of their experiences (Davys & Beddoe, 2009; Gursansky, Quinn, & Sueur, 2010) such as when reflecting on a case study.

Implicit in a case study, or "learning story," is the aim of moving someone through reflection towards an increased level of knowledge, improved practice, skill and awareness (Leggett & Ford, 2013). This may be possible because a case study can inspire people, identify what works, teach lessons and make connections with ideas that resonate with current practice and thinking (Calma, 2008, para. 51). It can also facilitate reflexivity.

Reflexivity may be described as a student's, worker's, supervisor's or researcher's critical awareness of the factors influencing knowledge creation (D'Cruz, Gillingham, & Melendez, 2006). It includes acknowledging the impact of the dynamic relationship existing between someone's thoughts and feelings (D'Cruz et al., 2006). Reflexivity can inform reflective thinking, and vice-versa. It is one tool for dealing with new, troubling or novel situations (Watts, 2015), such as those described within a case study. Reflexive thinking via a case study may be helpful for people associated with the human services sector. This is because presently this sector is immersed in restructuring and fast-changing global and local trends such as neo-liberal market principles, global managerialism, user-pay systems, technology, and aging populations (for example, EY, 2016; Zuchowski, Hudson, Bartlett, & Diamandi, 2014). The sector may be tempted to rely on customary actions and/or established social policies and procedures in dealing with its contemporary challenges (Archer, 2010). Case studies applying reflexivity principles may assist in considering alternative possibilities.

Reflexivity also assists investigations into current complex issues, which the human services sector faces, that cannot necessarily be solved by habitual actions (Archer, 2010). It is an attempt to prevent ineffective interventions and to ensure contemplation (Watts, 2015).

Reflexivity allows a person to explore and understand their influence on a given event or society, within a set of contextual frameworks or environments (Beres, Bowles, & Fook, 2011; Fook, 2012). This includes them considering their position in society, how it is constructed and its associated power (Watts, 2015). Such detailed critical contemplations,

such as through case studies, can be powerful and transformational for the student, worker or researcher and also for their human services context and operational boundaries (Kessl, 2009).

We agreed to be both reflective and reflexive in undertaking this research project. This approach to the inquiry first, assisted us in discussing our understanding of the ontology of the case study approach including its functions, value and power. Second, it supported our reflecting on the assumptions (hidden theory) embedded in our thinking about the case study and exposing these for examination (Fook, 2012). This was with the aim of improving our practice, teaching and research activities (Fook, 2012). Third, it provided new meanings and transformational experiences that allowed each of us to develop internally and professionally (Giles, Epstein, & Rhodes, 2011). This inquiry began with each of us acknowledging who we are, how we apply the case study method and situating ourselves within our associated environments.

The participants

Six inquirers participated in this research – four of us are female, two are male, all over 45 years old and each with over 25 years' experience within the welfare industry. We apply the case study method within our work. Mark uses the case study to simulate and reflect on critical incidents in supervision and for supporting recruitment processes. Melissa uses it to promote workers' and students' professional development and critical reflective practice. Jan utilises case study within staff supervision, student education and recruitment. Brian finds the case study method essential in developing social work students' capacity to reflect critically on practice and questions of ethics. Heather composes and utilises the case study in degree and postgraduate education, workplace learning, recruitment, supervision and staff coaching. The case study is one of Monica's preferred research methods for engaging with faith-based organisations.
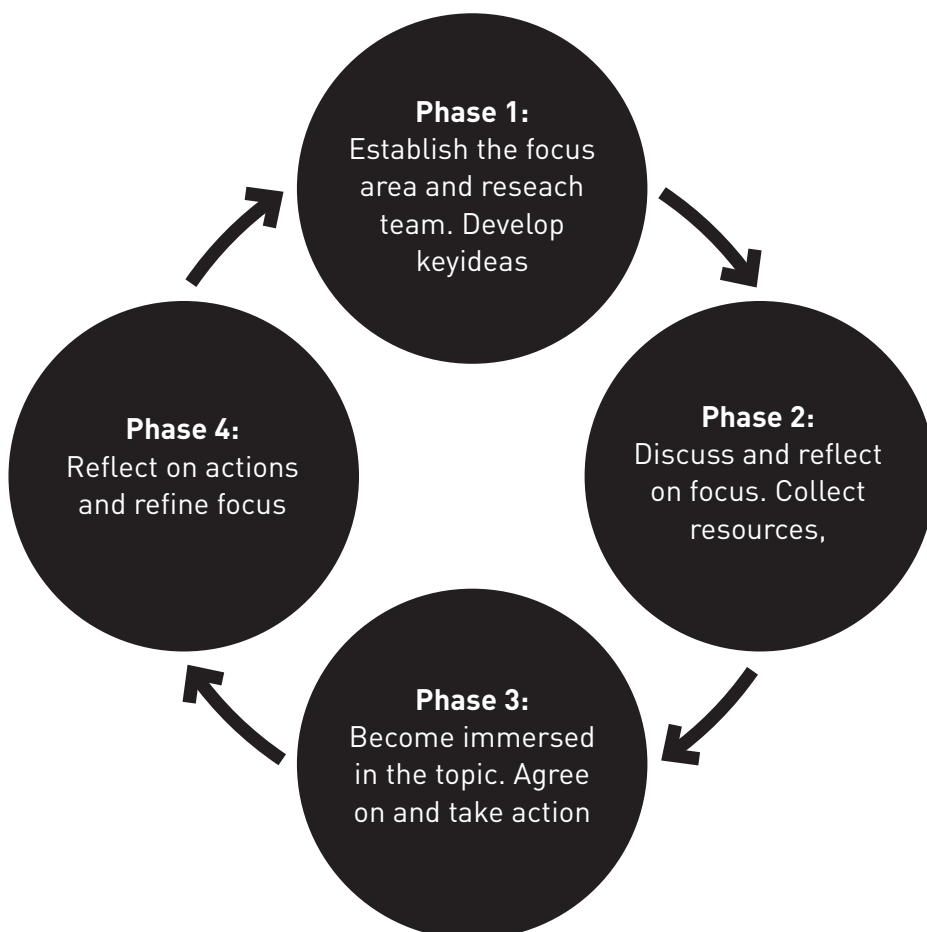
We all have utilised the case study to enhance our own and other's knowledge and wished to reflect on this common experience. Anscombe (2001) and Pawar and Anscombe (2015) argue social workers need to be professionals who "think, do and be," where *thinking* means applying knowledge, *doing* means practising and *being* means recognising people both shape (and are shaped) by their environment. We agree with their thesis, but extend it as being relevant for all human sector professionals. This approach gave us the opportunity to undertake a reflective and reflexive conversation about how we personally and professionally use case study to develop the *thinking, doing and being* competencies in others and ourselves.

METHOD

A co-operative inquiry is a non-traditional approach to research focusing on researching *with* people rather than *about* people (Reason & Heron, 2013). It is also an accessible research methodology that encourages inclusive research, allowing people from different workplaces and research experience to write as equals within a community (Short & Healy, 2017). This methodology is compatible with the idea that theory and practice are closely related, and is easily adapted to researching different social phenomena (Jones-Mutton, Short, Bidgood, & Jones, 2015).

We chose this methodology because it weaves practice knowledge or wisdom into theoretical frameworks (Howard, 2009). Our use of individual and collective case studies inspired us to start this co-operative inquiry and expand the existing practice wisdom about and theoretical understandings of the topic (Short & Healy, 2017). This inquiry methodology allowed us to consider the case study method through an alternative research lens; one that could challenge and extend our practice. The diagram below outlines the different stages of this methodology:

Figure 1. Co-operative inquiry phases Source: Short & Healy, 2017.

Phase 1:
Establish the focus area and research team. Develop key ideas

Phase 2:
Discuss and reflect on focus. Collect resources,

Phase 3:
Become immersed in the topic. Agree on and take action

Phase 4:
Reflect on actions and refine focus

In phase one, we came together as co-inquirers, reflected on the topic and agreed to become co-researchers; we formed a focus group also known as a focal group or inquiry group (Healy, Tillotson, Short, & Hearn, 2015). We launched this case study topic, agreed to meet weekly for three months and developed guidelines on how to collect and analyse our data. The minutes of each inquiry meeting were our data. We then cycled into phase two and became the co-subjects; we collected narratives and discussed our experiences of applying the case study method (Baldwin, 2006). We also undertook a reflexivity and reflection exercise; and as thinking, doing and being professionals we considered both how our practice and our identity influenced this research. In phase three, we immersed ourselves in the topic, consciously developing a new awareness of the functions and power of the case study (Healy et al., 2015). In phase four, we reflected on our actions, proposed

new themes for exploration and sorted our data into themes with assistance from a computer program NVIVO 10 (Oates, 2002; QSR International, 2014). As co-researchers, we cycled through our ideas until we were ready to finalise the project through the writing of this paper (Oates, 2002). The themes and insights we gained about our work and the themes generated by this research surprised us.

Forming a Research and Writing Community

We each have different reasons for joining this project. Uniting us is our interest in research, our experience in applying the case study method to our work, our commitment to social work field education and our dedication to the human services sector. Undertaking reflective and reflexivity exercises regarding our application of the case study approach was challenging and transformational. Our reflections on this research project allowed each of us to re-examine the fundamental basis on which we interpret the use of case study (Fook, 2012). For example, our conversation about the functionality and content of the case study allowed us to develop a more informed understanding of how we apply it. Our reflexivity helped us consider our own influence and the influence of our social and cultural context on the research (Fook, 2012; Pawar & Anscombe, 2015). Mark provides an example of this from his workplace.

I work with staff from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (about 85% of staff). Each comes with a different lens, life experiences, cultural understandings, and these impacts upon their approach to situations. Our agency use case study as a way to place colleagues safely within a situation or critical incident. They then can work through their reactions, internal thinking and the way they would handle that situation. It is about using the clients' voice within the narrative to help others reflect on themselves and on incidents.

Key Themes from the Inquiry Conversation (Results and Discussion)

We met weekly, via the telephone for about three months. Below is an overview of the themes and our thinking.

What is a Case Study? Is it Valuable?

A case study aims to depict people's experiences as authentically as possible within a narrative, and we believe this makes it valuable for our work situations. To us, this is because a case study potentially draws out events that are occurring within an environment (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana). The information drawn can be rich, vivid and condensed and therefore has the potential to feel real (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). The intricacies and complexities of phenomena may also be included (Miles et al., 2014). This can allow those studying the case access to the potential causation that is being played out (Miles et al., 2014). Two examples of this are provided:

Monica: *A colleague was concerned she was not fully understanding the situation of some people she was counselling and was reviewing her interventions. She converted her case notes as authentically as she could into a series of cases, anonymised the data and presented them to us via PowerPoint at a meeting. We assisted her with deconstructing and reconstructing her perceptions about the case.*

Monica: *A student was nervous about interviewing a person who was homeless. I drafted a case study. The student and I role-played the scenario taking turns to be the person providing counselling and the person receiving the counselling. We then critically reflected upon the student's listening skills, counselling approach, theoretical knowledge, interventions and possible referral strategy. This gave the student the confidence to interview the person when they attended the office.*

The case study, whether presented on paper, as a display or through an intentional conversation, or all three as Monica's above examples demonstrate, appear to us to be a very popular didactic and pedagogical tool. We regularly experience and apply the case study approach, as shown in the quoted examples below.

Brian: *A case study provides for the student on placement the opportunity to have that "light bulb" moment when what is considered useless or complex makes sense. For example, a student had difficulty thinking through an issue which had raised for them an ethical dilemma. In supervision we discussed a case study and explored the issues. I was able to gently assist the student to think through what is feasible, what is ethical and what theories they can apply to the situation.*

Heather: *The aim is to allow people to have a safe space for a supported experience where they can develop their skills, knowledge and awareness in a realistic way. For example, we use case studies to help orientate staff and students to the workplace.*

Within our workplaces, the case study is often utilised to facilitate reflexivity and reflection on ideas, practice, theories, structures and research. The extant literature also indicates this. For example, Pawar and Anscombe (2015), use the case study to explore the practice elements of individual and family work, the critical elements for reflective practice with communities and the terms *administrator, manager*, and *leader* within an organisation.

Content, Value, and Power of Case Study
Our initial conversation focused on the substance of a case study. Its didactic story assists people to engage with a social phenomenon intellectually and/or emotionally. This becomes possible because it gives context to situations allowing people to imagine and connect with them or with it. We thought this was one reason a case study appears powerful, for it engenders the movement beyond seeing an event or person as a cog or number within a bureaucracy – as evidenced here.

Brian: *The case study can give humanity to the person. Such as, when I am writing a response to a policy and I am reviewing quantitative date about a community or a group of people, a case study gives the story that exists behind the statistics, it humanises the people the statistics are describing.*

This humanising of social phenomena and the people associated with them, brings alive the context and content of an event, and simulates an activity, incident or investigation.

The case study can also counterbalance an efficiency-driven organisational environment whereby researchers, staff and students focus on meeting timelines, performance indicators or assessment activities. It can confront the risk of people habitually moving on to the next task without making time for contemplation. Melissa explains this:

Being in the public service for many years, I have noted an increase in pace. This involved a movement away from such things as spending time writing process recordings and reflecting on a case to quick electronic notes.

In contrast, the case study creates space for reflection, sparks connections and empathy, and encourages people to apply their emotional intelligence in a respectful and a reflexive way. Reflection and reflexivity creates the possibility of confronting personal perceptions, exploring beyond experience, engaging with alternative narratives and creating an opportunity for success to be realised.

We were quite impressed with these aspects of the case study, as Melissa explains:

It is about connecting with other human beings. It gets practitioners and students thinking quite deeply.

Such connection and engagement occurs because other faculties were involved (for example, emotion, imagination, and identification) rather than only logical thinking. This experience was outlined in our following conversation pieces:

Melissa: *It's a valuable time to stop, reflect, pause and consider the lives of the humans we are interfacing with…*

Jan: *It makes you wonder about situations…*

Monica: *We consider our own feelings, responses, ideas. We regard these connections between learning and feelings and/or imagination, as described in the above conversation pieces, to be important. "Relatively few scholars and practitioners in adult and higher education regard emotion as integral to the meaning-making process and as demonstrative of underlying and largely unconscious forms of meaning largely associated with learning" (Dirkx, 2006, p. 15). Harnessing the power of emotion, imagination and identification with the content through a case study, we consider a valuable basis for powerful learning. We perceive it to be transformational for all involved – that is the researcher, worker or student, the client or participant, and the organisation.*

Case Study Functions such as Research Within the Human Services Sector
Our inquiry highlighted different organisational contexts in which the case study operates. We categorised these into areas related to staff training and development; organisational benefits such as research, funding and recruitment; and student field education.

Staff training and development.
We utilise case study for reflection on peer or client interactions; staff education, skill development, preparation for a process or task, orientation, training, such as in workplace health and safety, and policy implementation. In these situations the case study can provide a clearer conceptualisation of context issues and organisational expectations. The comment below reflects this:

Mark: *It also about the organisation. Drawing out what does the organisation expect us to do around a situation … It allows people to develop professionally and provides opportunities for people to form different perspectives on activities.*

We perceive the case study as also useful for briefing and debriefing researchers, students and staff undertaking a process or around critical incidents. It can orientate people; increase people's confidence in their roles; promote participants', clients' or practitioners' safety; encourage quality service provision and improve practice. Heather observed this regarding practice:

For example, a case study in the child protection context can be used to step through the procedures required to respond to an initial report received, as well as a point of reflection for how the content of that report relates to the level of risk to the children who are subject to that report.

When reflecting on work-based crises, critical incidents and difficult or complex interactions, the case study was identified by us as a retrospective organisational or research tool used to illuminate processes and improve future procedures and practice. It allows the tracing of issues with operational links across time (Yin, 2009, p. 9, cited in Baskarada, 2014, p. 4).

Organisational benefits such as research and funding.
We are impressed with the case study functionality. Two authors spoke of utilising the case study in researching community engagements and organisational expectations or values. Two have used it as part of staff interview processes. The case study has also been used by an author's organisations in promotional advertising; to provide stories to program supporters; to advocate for resources with internal committees; to review outcomes; as an adjunct to statistics; to explain content within reports; and as a means of connecting staff with the organisation's aims, goals or client group.

For example, we were aware that case study research can be well suited to the investigation and/or research of issues. This is because it incorporates multi-variant contextual conditions and multiple sources of data (Yin, 2003). It is useful when the phenomenon under study is complex and not well conceptualised (Yin, 2003, p. 4, cited in Plath, 2014, p. 908). Monica gives an example of this from a recent project.

In 2015 I completed a research project into Anglican Churches engaging with people form culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Short, 2015). The research partners and I were keen to collect data from different locations, different churches, from a wide as possible group of people who were from a variety of cultures and across the adult age spectrum. The project was complex. The method I chose was a collective case study, because it successfully facilitated the collection of data from multiple sources and contexts.

Regarding networking and funding, we observed the case study as helpful in connecting external people with an organisation. These connections assisted us in obtaining additional support, referrals, funding, and networks. Two examples:

Jan: *In my previous employment, we had a request from a government agency for a report about a program and were asked to provide case studies. I thought that was a refreshing change. It made the report more interesting…*

Jan: *A manager was always asking for case studies for various advertisements. She requested anonymised descriptions of situations.*

Social work student field education.
For field educators, the case study can be a tool for interviewing students before commencing a placement. In this context it provides an opportunity for the prospective field educator/supervisor to gauge the prospective student's existing knowledge, their capacity to apply that knowledge and to some degree their cognitive skills and abilities in transferring learning to new contexts.

For social work students, the case study may be a pedagogical tool enabling them to process differences in practice contexts – for example between rural and urban localities. It allows students to form their social work identity and to critically consider how policies, organisational forms, and resources might impact on people requesting or requiring social work or other interventions. In these applications, the case study can highlight social justice issues and ethical dilemmas. It can also assist the student to consider what it means to respond as a thinking, doing and being professional applying the Australian Association of Social Workers (2010) *Code of Ethics* and/or other ethical frameworks.

These points about field education lead us to consider that a case study's explorations are a rich, useful and powerful tool in preparing students for industry; particularly when it is followed up with an investigation into relevant literature or procedures. This is demonstrated by the following comment:

Mark: *We use case study in our therapeutic modelling…. This is a challenge for some students… There is a story, and they are learning from it and adding to it.*

LIMITATIONS

This research project has a number of limitations with both its methodology and scope. First, the circular methodology used in this project does not fully represent the diversity of thinking or the full spectrum of problems within the field (Short & Healy, 2017), such as field education. The inquiry's focus on extant literature, its valuing of inquirers' experiences and acceptance of non-traditional knowledge means it does not test concepts or propose conclusive findings about practice, education or research.

Second, the scope of this inquiry is narrow, presenting the experience of a small, purposive sample of people. It did not invite extensive, in-depth comment from others such as colleagues, researchers or students outside the inquiry. Additionally, each of us were juggling professional and personal commitments alongside this research. We engaged with the project according to our time constraints. This differential engagement resulted in variations in immersion into this inquiry topic by each of us.

Regardless of these limitations, the project has a number of strengths as it provides an opportunity to review extant literature, share perceptions, and observations, and to develop our knowledge about the role of individual and collective case study within our practice, teaching and research. The limitations did not limit the richness of this research experience; the opportunity to describe, critique and contribute to theoretical and experiential knowledge about the power of the case study, or the ability to make recommendations.

In light of the above inquiry, we recommend that practitioners, supervisors, researchers, and managers:

1. be reflexive and reflective in their use of the individual and collective case study within all contexts;

2. consider being *thinking, doing and being* professionals who are intentional about when and why they use a case study approach; and

3. remember the power associated with a case study.

CONCLUSION

We, via this study, invite others to join us in contemplating the use of the case study method within the human service environment. This includes considering how the case study can be an effective way of meaning-making that enhances personal and professional development and knowledge within practice, education including work-based learning and research. Such meaning-making appears possible because the case study turns quantitative data and conversations into simulated, active, transformational and memorable learning. Through this inquiry, we became aware that investigations into, and literature about, the case study often focus on research applications and under-reports the functionality of the case study. We noted that the case study can be utilised within a workplace with little contemplation about why it is used or its value or power. The literature does not highlight how the case study promotes an intentional verbal conversation, such as within field education, opening up the faculty to wonder. The case study can scaffold staff training and development, field education activities and organisational activities such as research, reports, funding applications, networking activities, recruitment and advertisements. In our experience, the application of a case study elicits humanity within the human services. It sparks empathy, reflexivity and reflection. We realise its functionality makes the case study a valuable and powerful tool for learning, practice and research.

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