Conducting and Publishing Case Study Research in Sport and Exercise Psychology

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Case Studies in Sport and Exercise Psychology (CSSEP) publishes professional practice-focused and research case studies. The understanding of case study approaches in sport and exercise psychology has developed significantly building upon Giger and van Raalte’s pioneering special issue on case studies in The Sport Psychologist published in 2012. However, while there has been an increasing acceptance of case study dissemination methods, the conceptualization of specific methodological approaches to case study research in the field has been less well defined. Consequently, we seek to provide a brief overview regarding research approaches to case studies in psychology, and to offer prospective authors advice on publishing case study research in CSSEP.

Case study research designs have been embraced more fully to-date in psychology, shaping both the science and practice of the discipline, forming the beginnings of clinical specialties and even entire conceptual orientations (Tyna & Pendley, 2013). Seeking to clarify the case study methodology Yin (2009) suggested the approach to be “an all-encompassing method-with the logic of design incorporating specific approaches to data collection and to data analysis. In this sense, the case study is not either a data collection tactic or merely a design feature alone but a comprehensive research strategy” (p. 13). The use of case study approaches provides the opportunity for researchers to explore contemporary real-life phenomenon through the detailed contextual analysis of a limited number of events or conditions, and the relationships that exist within this context. Crucially, these approaches use a variety of sources of data, ensuring that each case of interest is not only explored through one lens, but rather a variety of lenses that allow for multiple facets of the case to be revealed and understood (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

There is some consensus within the social science literature that case studies should have a ‘case’ that is the object of study or evaluation; that this case is a complex functioning unit; investigation of the case should take place in the case’s natural environment; and the case should be contemporary (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Stake, 2000; Yin, 2009). Expanding this point, Stake (2000) suggested that the crucial focus of a case study is not the methods used, but interest in the specific case, including its idiosyncrasies and richness.

Before considering methodological approaches, it is important to clarify what a ‘case’ actually is, or can be. Cases are generally conceptualized as a phenomenon situated in time and space. They are more specifically “a phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context. The case is, in effect, your unit of analysis” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 25). Specific criteria regarding the appropriateness of a case for investigation/explanation include that: (1) it is a complex functioning unit; (2) it should be investigated in its natural context with a multitude of methods; and (3) should also be contemporary. To these criteria, we add that case studies can be undertaken...
using diverse ontological approaches, which serve quite different functions, such as providing a window into a unique world or a unique storytelling approach that is rich and vibrant. An important aspect of defining the case for a particular study is to identify boundaries regarding the scope of the case to ensure the evaluation remains focused (Johnsson, 2003).

Yin (2009), in articulating his view of a case study, outlined four conditions that should be considered before applying this research design: (1) that the focus of the study should be on answering ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions; (2) manipulating the behavior of those involved in the study is not allowed; (3) covering contextual conditions is important because you believe they are relevant to the phenomenon under study; and (4) that the boundaries are not clear between the phenomenon and the context.

A key feature of case study methodologies is that a range of different methods can be combined with the purpose of illuminating the case from a number of different angles: in essence triangulating by combining methodologies. Hence, a case study could be viewed as a meta-method (Johnsson, 2003).

Case studies have emerged from the philosophical paradigms of eclecticism and pragmatism. Eclecticism in this context is based on two core perspectives. The first, suggests that research methods are disengaged from paradigms, and as such can be combined in any way the researcher desires; often referred to as the compatibility thesis (Howe, 1988). The second perspective suggests that in the absence of transcendent truth and a sufficient method, researchers should pursue “what works” in context (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003), using whatever combination of methods seem appropriate. As a third perspective, the combining of these perspectives has been suggested to free the researcher from the constraints of paradigm rigidity. This freedom then serves to offer theoretically unlimited methodological resources (Yanchar & Williams, 2006), though we recognize that an openness to a breadth of approaches to case study research is essential, so long as these approaches are well articulated and methodologically sound.

**Construct, Internal, and External Validity**

Three main concerns have historically been raised regarding case study research. These particularly relate to construct validity, internal validity, and external validity. The main concern regarding construct validity has been that case study researchers often fail to develop a sufficiently operational set of measures and that “subjective” judgments are too often used in data collection (Yin, 2014). In outlining solutions to these issues, Yin (2014) suggested three specific approaches: (1) to use multiple sources of evidence (data); (2) to establish a chain of evidence during the data collection period; and (3) to have the draft case study reviewed by key informants, adopting a ‘member checking’ approach. To maximize internal validity Smith (1988) suggested that rigorous planning that includes: assessing multiple dependent measures repeatedly; triangulating evidence; replicating the results across cases; and collecting data in a systematic and logical manner could all be effective tools. The monitoring of potentially confounding variables in the study has also been suggested as an appropriate approach to adopt (Prapavessis, Grove, McNair, & Cable, 1992). External validity relates to whether the findings are generalizable beyond the current study. Part of the challenge here is that case studies cannot be used to prove that a specific intervention caused specific changes in the case. However, by evaluating multiple dependent variables, collecting both qualitative and quantitative data, the evaluation can provide a holistic picture of the intervention that can be used to document effectiveness and provide rich information that can be used to facilitate intervention improvement (Anderson, Miles, Mahoney, & Robinson, 2002).

More recently, the need to rigorously demonstrate the validity of qualitative inquiry has been challenged. For example, Sparkes and Smith (2009) suggested a move away from a criteria-based approach to judging qualitative research that they referred to as ‘criteriology.’ Instead, Sparkes and Smith suggested that authors should use looser considerations with which to judge research authenticity and quality. Building upon this point, Smith and Deemer (2000) and Smith and Hodkinson (2005) suggest that the criteria used to judge a piece of research should be broadly flexible, and relate to the specific piece of research, at the specific time, and in the specific context. What is important though is that the author outlines the approaches used (criteria) against which the quality of the research process and outcomes should be considered (see Sparkes and Smith, 2009 for further details).

**Triangulation of Data**

The Triangulation of data has been suggested to be of particular importance in seeking to ensure the validity of case study research. Although open to a number of