

METHODS IN PSYCHOLOGY

CASE STUDY METHOD

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- Case studies are in-depth investigations of a single person, group, event or community.
- Typically data are gathered from a variety of sources and by using several different methods (e.g. [observations](#) & [interviews](#)).
- Research may also continue for an extended period of time so processes and developments can be studied as they happen.
- The case study research method originated in clinical medicine (the case history, i.e. the patient's personal history).

Case study

- The case study method often involves simply observing what happens to, or reconstructing ‘the case history’ of a single participant or group of individuals (such as a school class or a specific social group), i.e. the [idiographic approach](#).
- Case studies allow a researcher to investigate a topic in far more detail than might be possible if they were trying to deal with a large number of research participants (nomothetic approach) with the aim of ‘averaging’.

Case study

- The case study is not itself a research method, but researchers select methods of data collection and analysis that will generate material suitable for case studies.
- Amongst the sources of data the psychologist is likely to turn to when carrying out a case study are:
 - [observations](#) of a person's daily routine
 - [unstructured interviews](#) with the participant herself (and with people who know her), diaries, personal notes (e.g. letters, photographs, notes)
 - official document (e.g. case notes, clinical notes, appraisal reports).
- Most of this information is likely to be [qualitative](#) (i.e. verbal description rather than measurement) but the psychologist might collect numerical data as well.

CASE STUDY

- Case studies are widely used in psychology and amongst the best known were the ones carried out by [Sigmund Freud](#).
- He conducted very detailed investigations into the private lives of his patients in an attempt to both understand and help them overcome their illnesses.
- Freud's most famous case studies include [Little Hans \(1909a\)](#) and The Rat Man (1909b).
- Even today case histories are one of the main methods of investigation in [abnormal psychology](#) and psychiatry.
- For students of these disciplines they can give a vivid insight into what those who suffer from mental illness often have to endure.

Little Hans

- **Little Hans - Freud (1909)**
- by [Saul McLeod](#) published 2008
- Little Hans was a 5-year-old boy with a phobia of horses. Like all clinical [case studies](#), the primary aim was to treat the phobia.
- However, Freud's therapeutic input in this case was minimal, and a secondary aim was to explore what factors might have led to the phobia in the first place, and what factors led to its remission. By 1909 Freud's ideas about the [Oedipus complex](#) were well-established and Freud interpreted this case in line with his theory.
- [Freud](#) didn't actually work directly with little Hans, but instead worked through correspondence with Hans' father, who was familiar with Freud's theories, and wrote to him when he first suspected that Hans had become a case that Freud might be interested in. Freud suggested possible lines of questioning which the father could try with Hans, and the father tried them and reported to Freud what had taken place.

Little hans

- The first reports of Hans are when he was 3 years old when he developed an active interest in his 'widdler' (penis), and also those of other people.
- For example on one occasion he asked 'Mummy, have you got a widdler too? Throughout this time, the main theme of his fantasies and dreams was widdlers and widdling.
- When he was about three and a half years old his mother told him not to touch his widdler or else she would call the doctor to come and cut it off.
- When Hans was almost 5, Hans' father wrote to Freud explaining his concerns about Hans. He described the main problem as follows: 'He is afraid a horse will bite him in the street, and this fear seems somehow connected with his having been frightened by a large penis'.
- The father went on to provide Freud with extensive details of conversations with Hans. Together, Freud and the father tried to understand what the boy was experiencing and undertook to resolve his phobia of horses.
- Freud wrote a summary of his treatment of Little Hans, in 1909, in a paper entitled "*Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-year-old Boy.*"
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Strengths of Case Studies

- Provides detailed (rich qualitative) information.
- Provides insight for further research.
- Permitting investigation of otherwise impractical (or unethical) situations.
- Because of their in-depth, multi-sided approach case studies often shed light on aspects of human thinking and behaviour that would be unethical or impractical to study in other ways.
- Research which only looks into the measurable aspects of human behaviour is not likely to give us insights into the subjective dimension to experience which is so important to [psychoanalytic](#) and humanistic psychologists.
- Case studies are often used in exploratory research.
- They can help us generate new ideas (that might be tested by other methods). They are an important way of illustrating theories and can help show how different aspects of a person's life are related to each other.
- The method is therefore important for psychologists who adopt a [holistic](#) point of view (i.e. [humanistic psychologists](#)).

Limitations of Case Studies

- Can't generalize the results to the wider population.
- Researchers own subjective feeling may influence the case study (researcher bias).
- Difficult to replicate.
- Time consuming.
- Because a case study deals with only one person/event/group we can never be sure whether conclusions drawn from this particular case apply elsewhere.
- The results of the study are not generalizable because we can never know whether the case we have investigated is representative of the wider body of "similar" instances