

# Using Case Studies to Build Theories of Psychotherapy

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## What is the point of research?

- The product of science is theory.
- Research provides quality control by comparing the theory with observations.

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## What is a theory?

- Theories are ideas stated in words (or numbers or diagrams or other signs).
- Changes in theories lead to changes in practice.

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## Overview of the case for case studies

- (1) Case studies use a strategy that is different from hypothesis testing but provides equivalent quality control.
- (2) Case studies can incorporate unique features and context.
- (3) Case studies facilitate improvements in theories.

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## (1) Hypothesis testing vs case study

- Both are empirical, scientific research.
- Both provide quality control on theory.

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## Statistical hypothesis testing strategy

1. Derive one statement from a theory.
2. Compare the statement with many observations.
3. If the observations match the statement, then confidence in the statement is substantially increased (e.g., not due to chance,  $p < .05$ )
4. This yields a *small* increment of confidence in the theory.

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## Case study strategy

1. Compare many theoretically-based statements with observations.
  - Describe case observations in theoretical terms.
  - How well does the theory describe details?
2. The change in confidence in any one statement may be small.
3. Because many statements are examined, the gain in confidence in the theory may be as large as from a statistical hypothesis-testing study.
4. Key: multiple points of contact between observation and theory.

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## Building theories of psychotherapy

- Theories of psychotherapy offer rich accounts of psychological problems and treatments.
  - Psychoanalytic, person-centred, cognitive-behavioural, and so forth.
  - Provide conceptual tools for practice.
- Case studies can scientifically assess clinical theories at a level closer to practice.

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## (2) Unique features of cases can inform theory

- Theories encompass more than one case.
- Each case includes unique features.
- Unique features are not error.
- Case studies use them to inform theory.

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## What the elephant is like

Observation	Inference
side	like a wall
tusk	like a spear
trunk	like a snake
leg	like a tree
ear	like a fan
tail	like a rope

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## The blind men and the elephant: Applying the parable to case studies

- The elephant (e.g., psychotherapy) has many aspects. Each case reveals something new.
- A good theory must account for distinctive features.
- Case studies can examine distinctive features.
- A focus on common themes will miss the interesting parts and may leave nothing.

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## (3) Abduction

Ideas change to fit observations; aspects of the observations become part of the theory.

Modifying, elaborating, or expanding theories in light of new observations.

- A logical operation, like deduction and induction.
- Theory can expand to encompass new phenomena.
- Constrained by previous theory and observations.
- The theory may be explained in different words, new illustrations.
- Observations accumulate in theory,

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Summary:

Building theories of psychotherapy

- Theories of psychotherapy offer rich accounts of psychological problems and treatments.
  - Psychoanalytic, person-centred, cognitive-behavioural, and so forth.
  - Provide conceptual tools for practice.
- Case studies can scientifically assess clinical theories at a level closer to practice.

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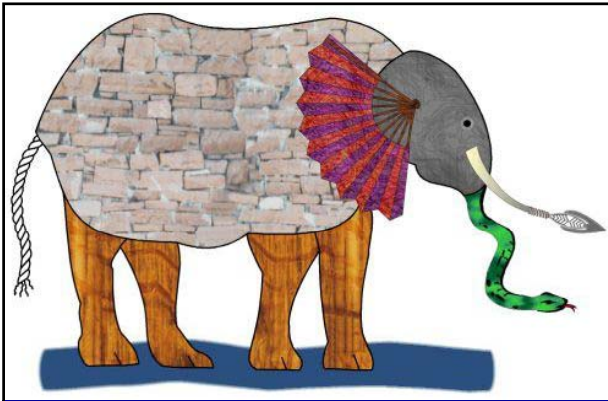
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Thank you.

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