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## **Review: Expanding the case study: The narrative thread**

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## Review:

### Expanding the case study: The narrative thread

Gary Rolfe

I am always surprised at the extent to which many nurse researchers indulge in what Janesick (1994:215) calls 'methodolatry', that is, 'the slavish attachment and devotion to method that so often overtakes the discourse...'. Method(ology) is too often worshipped as inviolable, and 'method slurring' (Baker et al., 1992) is condemned as lacking rigour. For Morse (1991:15) 'such mixing, while certainly "do-able" .... is not good science; the product is a sloppy mishmash'. Taken to its extreme, this stance would argue that if a research question does not fit into any existing methodology, the question should be changed rather than the methodology. It is refreshing, therefore, to find a paper in which the author is willing to question the appropriateness of the traditional case study methodology for researching fluid and constantly changing environments such as hospitals.

It should be noted at the outset that the author is not making any grand claims. What he has developed is not a new methodology but a framework, a way of organising and framing the study. Furthermore, he did not start out with the intention of developing a new framework, but ran into difficulties in the early stages of a more or less traditional hospital-based case study when it gradually became clear that there was simply no case left to study. This led to a question which I am sure has been framed by many researchers over the years: 'What could be salvaged from the research?'

What has been salvaged is a flexible research framework for generating and testing theory. As the author himself points out, the framework might itself be original, but it is composed of elements from a variety of different qualitative methodologies. From grounded theory he has borrowed the technique of theoretical sampling but rejected the rigidity of theory construction advocated by Corbin and Strauss (1998). From action research he has borrowed the reflexive process of generating and testing theory in the research arena but without the imperative of transforming the

practice setting or engaging the practitioners directly in the research process. And from case study itself he has borrowed Yin's flexible approach to defining the unit of analysis that makes up the 'case' (Yin, 1994), but has rejected the geographical constraints that the methodology usually imposes. Purists might hold up their hands in horror at such a mix and match approach to research design, but in many ways the new framework has arisen inductively from the practice setting, much as the data arise from a grounded theory study.

The key question, however, and one that the author himself asks, is: 'Did it work?' His answer is a qualified 'yes', although, like all good inductive researchers, he also identified a number of modifications along the way.

Ultimately, there is no reason why the framework should not be subjected to its own 'narrative thread' analysis. In fact, it is already half-way there, having been generated inductively in response to the research question: 'How can I salvage my PhD research?' The next stage (and the real test of ingenuity and creativity for the author) must now be to test the framework deductively.

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