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## EDITORIAL

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# GUIDELINES FOR CASE STUDY SUBMISSIONS TO *CONSULTING PSYCHOLOGY JOURNAL: PRACTICE AND RESEARCH*

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Guidelines and purposes for case study submissions to *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research* are presented in this article. The purposes of empirical research studies and case studies are reviewed and differentiated. Common problems with case studies submitted to the journal are identified. Recognizing that the intent is not to be narrowly prescriptive, detailed suggestions are made about what should (and should not) be included in a case study submitted to this journal.

**Keywords:** case studies, qualitative research, methodology, research guidelines

In addition to publishing empirical research and theoretical research studies and *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research (CPJ)* also publishes case studies. Well-crafted case studies can add depth and breadth to the growing knowledge base in the field of consulting psychology. They can also advance the professional practice of consulting psychology by demonstrating how theory and research may practically be applied and by reporting case material useful in advancing hypotheses that can later be studied more systematically.

The guidelines included here are offered to prospective authors of case studies as a way of helping to assure that case studies will be well prepared and more likely to receive favorable publication consideration when submitted to the journal. The American Psychological Association (APA) has long had standards on, and educated its members with regard to, the correct ways to present scientific information (see, among other sources, APA, 2010). However, to our knowledge, a similar guide has never been formally issued for articles concerning experience and learning that is developed through practice in the various specialties and proficiencies in psychology. Therefore, we hope that this article will be useful in stimulating additional submissions of high quality case studies to *CPJ* or other journals.

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## Purposes of Case Studies

What are the purposes of case studies? Whereas in empirical or theoretical studies the intent is usually to advance knowledge through the process of applying empirical research methods to test particular theories and the like, in case studies the purpose is usually to demonstrate how theories or research apply to the professional practice of the discipline (see, e.g., Myers, 2009; Silverman, 2005). Of course, documenting systematic application of well established theory based on research can itself be a valuable contribution to the literature. The aims of case studies, however, are also to advance the field of professional practice and to validate or question theory and empirical findings through applications. Additionally, case studies can sometimes identify unique issues that have not been contemplated by theory or research that will be useful for generating hypotheses, practical solutions, and conceptual questions that can later be tested more systematically.

Case studies are also one form of evidence and information that can be used by practitioners to develop their knowledge and skills. Effective case studies add depth and breadth to the growing knowledge base in the field of consulting psychology. They can document innovations and help to assess their application in various settings. We also recognize that within the practice area of consulting psychology the majority of professionals will spend most of their time and energy providing consultation services to various clients. In addition, the case study can be very useful in explicating idiographic aspects of practice not usually addressed by theory in the nomothetic sense. Therefore, we believe that the field of consulting has been and will continue to be particularly useful in advancing the professional practice aspects of the discipline of psychology.

## Common Problems With Case Studies

We recognize that the discipline of consulting psychology will advance through the development of theoretical, conceptual, *and* practice innovations. A well-developed case study can contribute to the field of consulting psychology no less than can other, more traditional types of articles. However, the manner in which the case study is written and presented will make a difference as to whether or not it will assist in advancing the field. As Lowman (2001, pp. 120–121) put it, “The goal is rarely just to learn about a single situation (unless it is one of unique, referential value as, e.g., the first case of *x* in organizational type *y*) but, rather, to use the case to help develop a theory and practice consistent with case findings and to fine-tune and revise theory to guide empirical research. It is for their potential for *generalizing* that case studies are needed. The same may be said about commentary about case studies: It needs to help us toward the goal of creating more of a science of organizational diagnosis and intervention.” Judging from cases submitted to *CPIJ*, there are a number of problems commonly encountered with case studies becoming solid contributions to the literature.

1. Cases do not always or in sufficient detail describe the facts of the case in an objective manner, relatively free of interpretative comments;
2. The case study starts with a theory or theories and works backward to the facts of the case, which prevents considering whether alternative theories might better explain the facts of the case;
3. The case does not consider that more than one theory or set of empirical research findings could be consistent with the facts of the case and their interpretation;
4. The case “takes sides” about particular issues, classifying some as being villains and others as heroes;
5. There is insufficient integration of theory or research into the case;
6. There is insufficient rigor in the integration of case material with theories and empirical research;
7. There is too much implicit (or explicit) commercialization, promoting a particular method, assessment tool, or consultant;
8. The case lacks the necessary detachment by which one can write about a case as if it could have been written by someone who had no direct involvement in it;

9. The case is too long. Submissions longer than 25 double-spaced pages including the cover page and all tables, figures, and references are apt to result in a recommendation that they be cut. (Journal space is at a premium in all journals: keeping a case as short as it can be to present all material relevant to the case is recommended.)

## **Things to Consider Before Preparing a Case**

### **Overview of What Belongs in a Case Study**

Lowman (2001, p. 120) suggested the following principles for the development of meaningful case studies. “Whatever the specific format of the case study, it is important that each incorporate several features. [The case should include as] detailed, accurate, and objective as possible description of (a) the specific case events and variables, including human ones; (b) the diagnostic interpretations made of the data in a; . . . (c) the specific interventions made, their observed and measured effects; and (d) plausible alternative explanation[s] of the results in [the] particular context of the case. The discussion should include alternative interpretations of the data and a serious discussion of the limitations of the case and of the methodology used in the case. As much as possible, authors need to present their cases in a way that maximizes the ability of others to . . . metaanalyze [cases], if not in a statistical sense, at least in a metaphorical one.”

### **Case Outline**

We offer the following outline in preparing cases for *CPIJ*:

1. *Abstract.* The abstract needs to be a succinct summary of the major findings of the case study contextualized in its specific setting. Too often abstracts in submitted cases introduce new material, miss the major points of the author(s)’ article, or fail to realize the importance of the abstract for archival and data retrieval purposes;
2. *Introduction and Anchoring of the Case in the Literature.* The case material to be presented should succinctly be anchored in the literature that has preceded it;
3. *Information about the Consultants.* Describe the consultants and consulting organization(s) involved in the project including the demographics, education, practice setting (e.g., independent practice, partnership, boutique, major company, “big six” firm), specializations and practice areas, and whether the case is typical of the types of cases and assignments undertaken by the case’s author(s).
4. *Description of the Client.* Characteristics of the client/client organization (size, age, industry, organizational structure, strategic analysis including a brief description of its strengths, weaknesses, threats, and opportunities). Confidentiality and ethical guidelines (e.g., American Psychological Association, 2002) should be followed. Generally, it is a good idea for the case to be reviewed by the client or former client and/or a representative of the organization at which the consultation occurred in advance of submitting it for publication consideration.
5. *What Led Up to the Request for Consultation and Who Made It?* This brief section should include the consultant’s assessment of the organization’s status and issues that led to the consultation request. It is generally helpful also to identify in at least a general (disguised) way the client and/or the executives responsible for the consultation project.
6. *Consulting Contract.* Describe the major steps in developing the consultation relationship and agreement reached with the client and provide a brief description of the actual agreement with the client.
7. *Description of the Assessment Results, the Intervention, and the Rationale.* Briefly describe the assessment results and diagnosis, the theory or research on which the assessment and intervention was based, and the scope and goals of the project.
8. *Process and Dynamics of the Consulting Project.* Next, the case should succinctly describe the process and progress of the services as they were delivered. Authors may

wish to highlight activities according to the timing or phase of the consultation project, unique characteristics of specific activities and events, new or creative types of interventions or combinations of interventions, and activities or events that made a major contribution to the success or failure of the project.

9. *Resistances*. Describe major problems and issues that were encountered in during the project (resistances, barriers, and roadblocks). How were these addressed? If those methods did not work, explain why.
10. *Results*. Include a description of the outcomes and impacts of the consultation assignment including any empirical results that are available. Include positive and negative results for the organizational client, subsystems or individuals within that organization, the consultant(s) themselves (and, as appropriate, the consultants' own organization).
11. *Key Learnings*. What did the consultants learn from the case that was not already in the literature? How did the case illuminate a particular theoretical approach/empirical findings or show their limitations? What conceptual and theoretical observations and implications, operational, practical, and practice implications came from the study that might be important for other professionals to know? What personal and professional growth occurred in the consultant(s)? What hypotheses might be generated from the case study that would be worthwhile to test further or more systematically? Are there any other observations, advice, thoughts, or feelings of that have archival value for journal readers?
12. *Summary and Implications*. This final section should succinctly summarize the learnings from the case and its theoretical and/or empirical implications. Remember that journal writing is about advancing knowledge; authors should be clear on how their case has done so.

### **A Checklist for Evaluating Case Studies**

Once submitted, case studies will go through the usual peer review process used by this journal. Carefully reviewing a case in advance (or having a colleague do so) from the perspective of how a reviewer might consider it will enhance the likelihood of an ultimately favorable review. The following criteria may be useful for deciding if a case is ready to be submitted.

#### **Evaluation of Specific Aspects of the Case**

- Is there anything new or compelling about the case?
- Is the case objectively and dispassionately written?
- Was the submission, including all references and citations, in appropriate APA style?
- Were all the recommended domains of the case (e.g., abstract, introduction, client, project, key learnings, other advice) represented?
- Is the article overly long (or short) or about the right length to cover all important aspects of the case?
- Was the writing style clear, coherent, direct, with a high degree of engagement and overall readability?
- Was the coverage of existing literature adequate and up-to-date?
- How solid was the integration of theory and research with the facts of the case?
- Is the author(s)' assessment of the described case facts convincing?
- Was the intervention used appropriately anchored in relevant theory and research?
- Were the described interventions appropriate to the assessment and the facts of the case as they were presented?
- Have the author(s) addressed the implications of the case for the professional practice of psychology? Are there any hypotheses that can be generated from the case material for research or practice in consulting psychology?
- Have the author(s) demonstrated why readers should care about the results of the case?

## Overall Evaluation

In which of the following categories would an objective reviewer likely place the case:

Best case study I have read recently; critical and new information; well done; critically needed by the journal's readers.

Above average case providing interesting and new information, a fresh perspective, unusual applications; likely to be a solid and useful contribution for the profession and the journal's readers.

Average submission; adds value to the field; has flaws but they are correctable; relevant to the journal's readers.

Done before; too incomplete; below average; too many flaws; unlikely to be salvagable.

Unneeded work; irrelevant to the journal's readers; beyond salvage: even with major revisions will not likely be adequate or warrant publication.

## Not Rigid Prescriptions

These guidelines and guidance on case studies are not meant to be rigidly prescriptive. We understand that consulting psychology and organizational development cases can unfold in unpredictable and creative ways. However, we do aim to improve the quality of submissions of case studies to journals such as this one and to increase the likelihood that well-written case studies will ultimately receive positive acceptance for publication.

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