Case studies – an overlooked technique in evaluation?

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What is a Case Study?

A detailed description and assessment of a real-world situation.

A comprehensive, holistic study of a bounded social unit —such as a person, family, community, institution, or event. (Young, Cooley, Goode & Hatt).

Features of Case Study Research

Depth and intensity: Focus on one case or a small number of cases, studied thoroughly.

Holistic approach: The case is treated as an integrated whole, not broken into isolated variables.

Bounded system: The case is clearly defined in time, place, and activity.

Multiple sources of evidence: Interviews, documents, observations, archival records, surveys, focus groups etc — triangulated for validity.

Naturalistic context: The researcher avoids manipulating the environment; the case is studied as it naturally occurs.

Qualitative (often mixed-methods): Rich narrative data, sometimes combined with quantitative evidence.

Why Use Case Studies in Evaluation?



Case studies are useful when:

The evaluator is asking **“how” or “why”**.

The focus is on a **phenomenon** (experience) in a real-world setting.

To understand **complex social processes**, meanings, or interactions.



Case studies help evaluators:

Explore **new interpretations** and identify deviant or unexpected occurrences in program implementation and impact.

Provide **insights** into social behaviour.

Reveals things, dynamics, unintended consequences that are hard to see.

Realist Evaluation – Context, Mechanism and Outcome

Evaluations should explore how the interconnections between specific mechanisms and contexts lead to observable outcomes. This paradigm shift urges evaluators to consider not just the presence or absence of outcomes but the reasons for their occurrence in a particular context, providing deeper insights into program effectiveness (Pawson & Tilley, 1997; Mukova-Moses, 2017).

Phenomenological Exploration

The suitability of the case study approach has been identified for studies that defy simple quantification and require the recognition of nuances of attitude and behaviour: "By going directly to the social phenomenon under study and observing it as completely as possible, you can develop a deeper and fuller understanding of it" (Babbie, 1991, p.285).

Evaluation of Community Resilience Teams



Australian Red Cross

2023

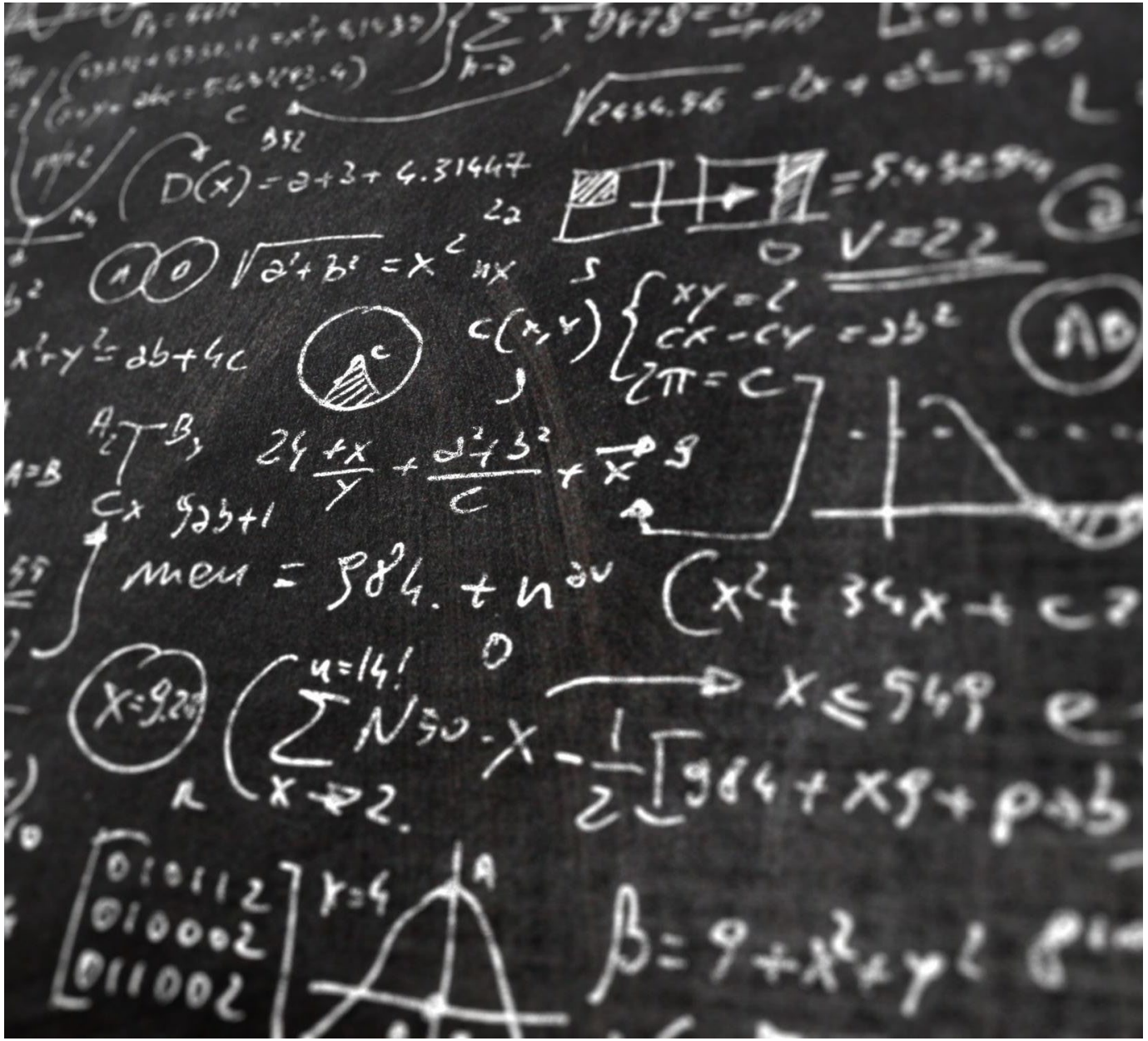
Community Resilience Teams (CRTs)

CRTs provide *"a way for community members to support each other and improve their capacity for disaster resilience."*

They are described as "led by residents for residents."

They operate on an 'opt-in' basis.

CRT Relevance to Theory

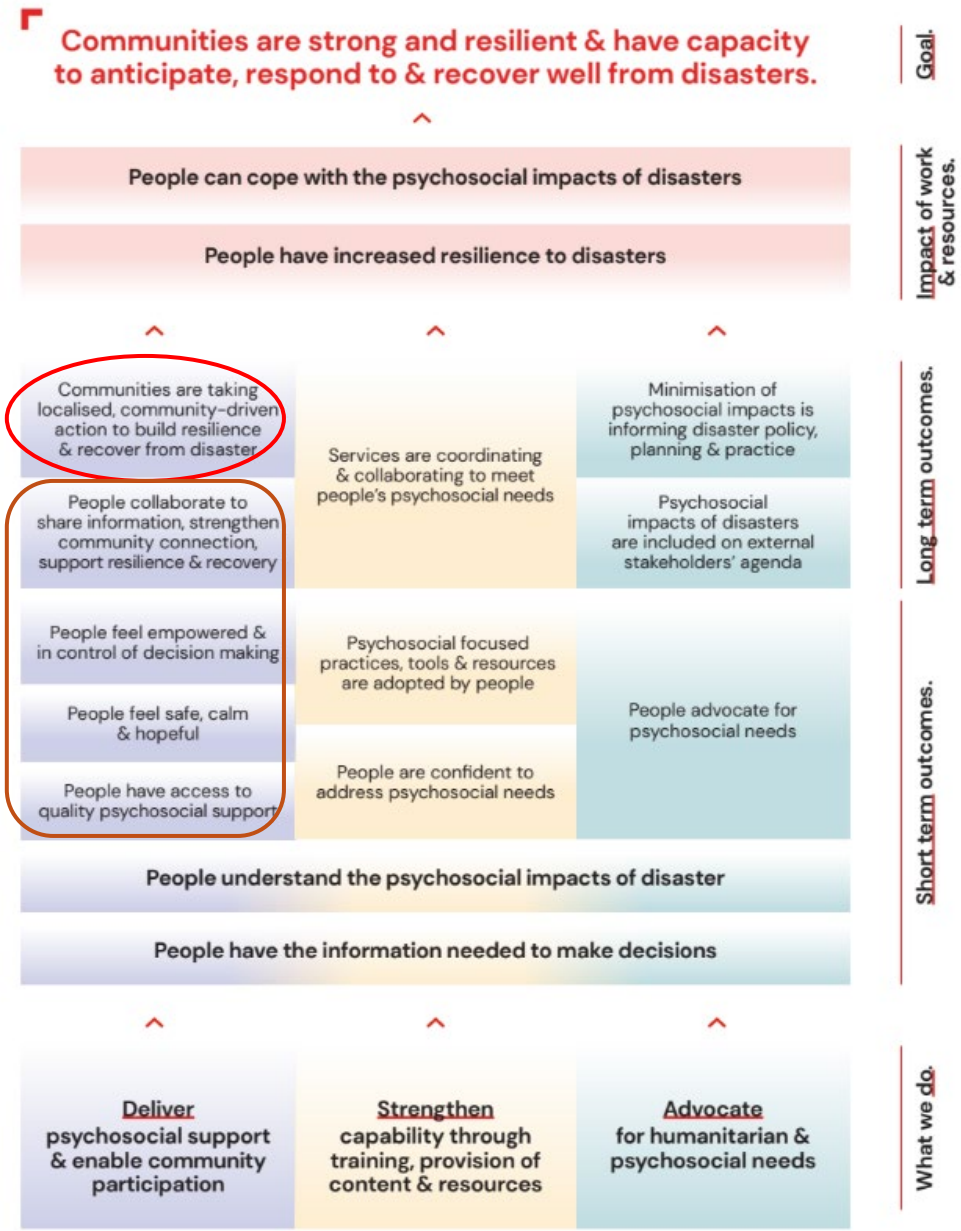


Richardson (2014) - Australian Red Cross - Beyond Vulnerability

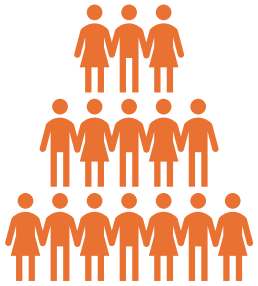
Target household preparedness activities by linking resilience to four adaptive capacities:

1. Knowledge
2. Connection
3. Security
4. Wellbeing

2.2 Theory of Change



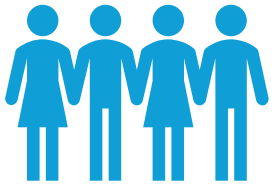
There were three evaluation questions:



Were the Community Resilience Teams well designed and supported?



Were the Community Resilience Team activities relevant and appropriate?



To what extent were intended outcomes for Community Resilience Teams achieved?

Evaluation Activities

- Visits to six communities:
- Interviews with external stakeholders
- Review of documentation
- Data

Selection of Case Study Communities

- Has the community been impacted by disaster in the past 12 months?
- Does the community have a mature Community Resilience Team in place? OR Does the community operate without a Community Resilience Team?
- What are the characteristics of the community regarding:
  - Nature of the disaster impacts
  - Local socio-economic profile
  - Indicators of community strength, such as shared identity, cohesion, and social trust/collaboration.
- Two exclusion criteria were set to meet the objective of minimal risk of harm:
  1. Communities that are currently pre-occupied with immediate disaster response activities;
  2. Communities in which people are highly distressed to a point where engagement could add to this distress.



Data Collection

- Visits to the case study communities occurred over a two-month period during the Spring season.
- During the visits semi-structured interviews were conducted with the Team leaders and street coordinators (between two and four people per community; a total of 20 people).
- Information on the establishment and operation of the Teams was collected through these interviews.
- Materials, documentation and visual resources on Community Resilience Team activities were collected during the visits. Photographs were taken of local features or assets relevant to disaster response and resilience.
- Demographic and socio-economic profiles of the communities were developed drawing on data from multiple sources including Australian Bureau of Statistics data and local government planning data.

Data Analysis

Content analysis was undertaken on documents and materials.

Thematic analysis was undertaken on the notes and quotations gathered from the interviews. Deductive initially, using the evaluation outcome measures as the framework, but shifted to inductive using information from the interviews.

Observation data subjected to analysis against the emerging themes from the interview data. Where observations challenged the thematic findings, the coding was checked a second time.

Finally, the emerging findings for each case study were considered against the other case studies to identify similarities and differences.

Commonalities and Variations in Communities

CASE STUDY COMMUNITY/ACTIVITIES	One	Two	Three	Four	Five	Six
Phone or Online Communication of Emergency Information	Yes	Yes	No	Not yet	Yes	Yes
Point of Contact with Emergency Management Agencies	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Means of Physical Contact with Residents, e.g. Street Coordinators	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Not yet
Coordination of Activities with Residents	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No
Training for Residents on Disaster Resilience	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No
Educate Residents on Disaster Safety	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Identification of Residents with Resources/Skills	Yes	Yes	Yes	Not yet	No	No
Checks of Vulnerable People	Yes	Yes	Yes	Not yet	Yes	Yes

To What Extent Were Outcomes Achieved?

Elements for Gaining Community Acceptance

Practical and focus on immediate and short-term actions in localities.

Address basic needs for survival/safety

Light touch and ‘opt in’ attitude

Minimal personal details required for involvement

Reliable information for individuals to make decisions on disaster responses

Provide a voice for communities into disaster plans

“Communities are taking localized, community-driven action to build resilience and recover from disaster.”

The case studies undertaken for this evaluation demonstrated clearly that the CRTs were excellent vehicles through which individuals and households could be enabled to take practical steps for preparation, planning, capability building and actual responses to disasters.

A Conundrum Emerged

The four adaptive capacities from the *Beyond Vulnerability* report, knowledge, connection, security and wellbeing (Richardson, 2014; Richardson et al., 2023), were more easily identified as the outcomes of Community Resilience Team activities.

The design of community-based programs under the Australian Red Cross community disaster resilience model tends to draw on theories surrounding social development and capacity building that assume social benefits will generate greater and more widely held impacts across a community (Putnam, 2000).

Commentary from a Realist Perspective

In contexts where autonomy and self-reliance are strongly valued, Community Resilience Teams primarily activated mechanisms related to information access, confidence, and self-efficacy, producing outcomes at the individual and household level rather than in collective social capital.

Many people living in small rural and remote communities in northern New South Wales have a strong preference and capability for self-reliance. Their choice to live in isolated areas and provide for themselves reflects this.

This evaluation observed that these residents were not inclined to relate much or rely on others beyond what is essential to preserve life and safety during a disaster response.

Tips for Case Studies in Evaluations

When?

When there is a **social dimension** to the focus of the evaluation, e.g. community-based programs, behavioural programs.

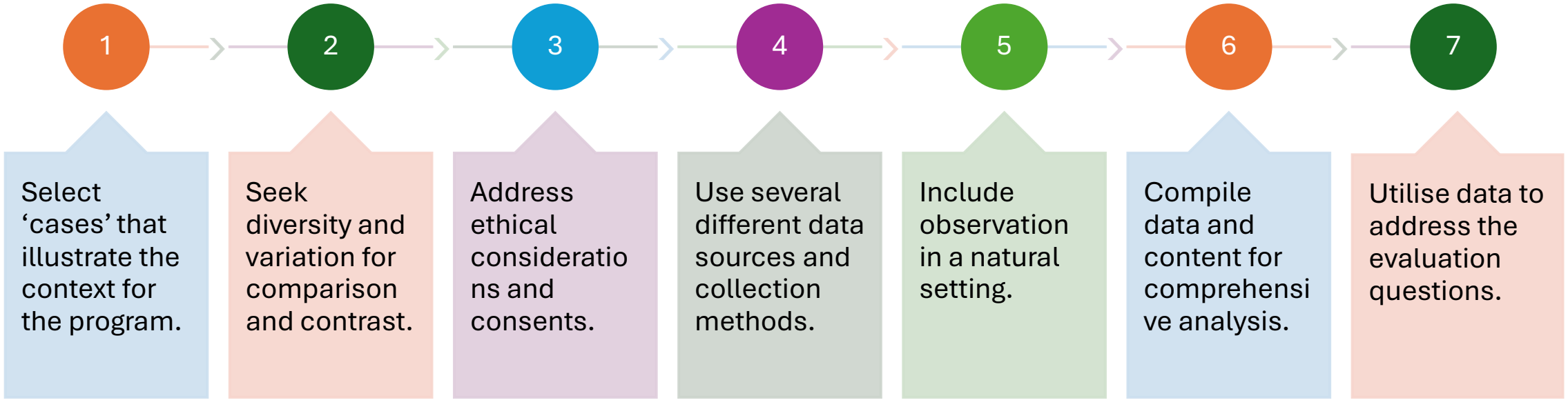
When **context matters**, i.e. when a policy, program or service is being delivered across multiple social settings.

When **variation is a key consideration** in assessing impact.

When the **program logic is not fully understood** or needs to be tested against theoretical frameworks and design principles.

When the evaluation is oriented towards **learning and improvement** based on recent activities and their outcomes.

How?


1
Select ‘cases’ that illustrate the context for the program.
2
Seek diversity and variation for comparison and contrast.
3
Address ethical considerations and consents.
4
Use several different data sources and collection methods.
5
Include observation in a natural setting.
6
Compile data and content for comprehensive analysis.
7
Utilise data to address the evaluation questions.

Use in Evaluation Findings

Explain	Declare	Address	Utilise	Keep
Explain the use of case studies in the evaluation.	Declare the limitation as well as the opportunities.	Address ethics considerations and actions.	Utilise case study data alongside other data sources if possible.	Keep the analysis and reporting of findings aligned to the evaluation questions.

Questions?

Further Reading

Woodward, A. R. and Kelly, L. M. Context is Everything in the Evaluation of Community-Based Programs. Evaluation Journal of Australia. 2026. DOI: 10.1177/1035719X251414986

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