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Book review

The Case for Research

Dennis Hardy¹

Gary Thomas (2011) *How to do your Case Study: A Guide for Students and Researchers*. London: Sage. ISBN 978-0-85702-562-3 and ISBN 978-0-85702-563-0 (pbk).

Robert K. Yin (2012) *Applications of Case Study Research* (3rd edition). Los Angeles: Sage. ISBN 978-1-4129-8916-9 (pbk).

It should not cause surprise when yet another book is published on case study research. The shelves of most academic libraries are already laden with books on this subject, and yet more keep appearing. The reason is obvious enough, for there is a constant flow of new students and researchers embarking on projects that are based on one or more case studies. Nor are these confined to any one discipline, as across the board the method is applicable. Medics and marketing specialists, accountants and archaeologists, engineers and educationalists might all have occasion to work on a case study. For a well-prepared book to guide the newcomer to this type of research, the sales potential is enormous—something that the international publisher, Sage, knows very well with the launch of two more titles in the range.

The publication of the book by Gary Thomas (Professor of Education at the University of Birmingham, UK) has a no-nonsense title that will appeal to anyone working on a case study for the first time. He writes in an authoritative but accessible way and not without a healthy dose of humour. For Thomas there should be no mystique about the case study approach: you should concentrate on one thing, look at it in detail, and avoid generalising on the basis of a single case. Strictly speaking, a case study is not really a method at all but, rather, a means by

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which one can use different methods. The important thing is the sharp focus it provides and the opportunity it offers to explore something from varying angles, to whatever depth one wants. Drilling deep is its unique selling point.

With seemingly endless examples in most fields, it is not usually too difficult to find a suitable case study. More challenging for most students is the task of then asking the right questions. Unless the exploration is framed well, all that will emerge is a collection of facts and an outcome that is no more than descriptive. Careful groundwork is essential. With good research questions, facts will become evidence and a number of hidden truths will be revealed. Thus, in the business realm, a marketing student, for instance, could choose one of a large number of possible cases and then proceed to ask key questions. What makes one marketing strategy more effective than another? How important is leadership in a marketing unit? To what extent do marketing specialists in a firm take account of cultural or geographical differences amongst potential consumers? Any one of these or other questions can lead the researcher into previously unexplored territory and from there to the prospect of discovery.

Professor Thomas does a good job in pointing case study researchers in the right direction, or at least in a direction from where they can find their own way. He speaks the language of a social scientist but that should not deter the many business and management students who want help with this approach to research. For the more philosophically minded, he also offers a final chapter in which he shows why the case study is sometimes denigrated as an inferior means of research, but also how this kind of critique can be rebutted. The main problem, argues Thomas, is that the case study fails to provide a basis for generalisation. That is true enough, as it is never intended to do that. Instead, it can reveal a degree of complexity and depth of understanding that may well be unattainable through other approaches. The outcome is likely to be unique—relating to only that one case—but that, in itself is hardly a bad thing if a depth of understanding is the prize.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the Atlantic, Robert K. Yin has added to his prodigious output of books on case study research. Yin's *Case Study Research* is in its fourth edition and

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Applications of Case Study Research (the volume now under review) is the third edition. He is a practitioner, too, with a consultancy that undertakes projects in applied research and social science.

So that it can be read as a stand-alone book, the first section offers an overview of case study research. With the new reader to the subject brought quickly up to speed, the rest of the book is devoted (as the title suggests) to practical applications. These range widely from a citizen patrol initiative to a neighbourhood organisation, and from a sheriff's task force to a community project to provide assistance for cases of HIV/AIDS. A bias in favour of social issues is a reminder that the case study approach is deeply rooted in sociological research. Equally, several case studies from the world of business illustrate its versatility and application in this field too.

The examples from the latter tackle issues that any business researcher would find interesting. Through a specific case, the question is asked how it was that one of America's top corporations—which made its name through the design and production of computers—could rise and fall over just four decades. In another case, a reverse process was studied, illustrating how a firm which at one stage faced production difficulties was then able to successfully re-engineer itself. Serving, incidentally, as a riposte to those critics of the case approach who argue that it does not allow generalisation, Yin takes no less than fourteen examples of firms that have undergone successful business transformations. From this kind of multi-sourced evidence it then becomes possible to draw some general conclusions.

Yin's book is not directed to the experienced researcher and is modelled more as a textbook containing points for discussion and suggested exercises for students. Being in its third edition it is obviously a commercial success, although one is left wondering whether it would have been more effective to have treated theory and practice side by side in a single volume. That apart, both Thomas and Yin have produced useful texts for anyone approaching case study research for the first time.