Do writers of case studies focus too much on the angle instead of describing reality?

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper’s objective is to explain whether the author of case studies focus too much on the angle they chose instead to focus on reality.

Methodology - A study of secondary sources about case studies and the chosen angle was made for this paper. Data from 31 sources, both scientific and others, was collected to get an answer on the question.

Findings – There are different opinions regarding the individual angle and the researcher bias and how it affects a case study.

Keywords Case study, angles, subjectivity, case study methodology, case study research method, research method, limitations of case studies

Paper type – Research paper

Introduction

Case study research is a research method that has been defined in many ways. Yin defined this research method as follows in 1994 “research situations where the number of variables of interest far out-strips the number of datapoints”.(Gibbert & Winfried, 2010). In industrial marketing, case study research is the most popular method for researchers. (Easton, 2010) Although, there is a lot of doubts in this method.(Ellram, 1996)

Firstly, there is no general and crystal clear definition on what a case is. (Jacobsen, 2002) Secondly, case studies has been criticized since some claims that is lacks generalization, the consequences of the author choose an angle and if that creates a bias since it makes the research subjective. Regarding the second doubt, Ebbesson explains that every author wants to make a good story and therefore develops an angle that nobody else paid attention to, to get as much interest as possible. (Hibbard, 2012) Every author has a different way of interpret the same data, which could create a researcher bias.

The purpose of this paper is to report if the author is focusing too much on the angle so that the reality fades away.
Method
To answer my research question I use a secondary sources research method, which is a common way to make a research. I use information that has been written or/and collected by others. (Jacobsen, 2002) One main difficulty with this research-method is to which extent one can rely on the sources. The further away from the first source we get, the more people has interpreted the actual data, which can be a source of error. (Jacobsen, 2002)

I have gathered secondary data from multiple scientific articles and studies, case studies and other studies to get an answer on the question asked. I primarily use databases as “Scopus” and “Web of Science” to get my frame of references but also from databases as “Google scholar”, “Emirald” and “Science Direct”. As I couldn’t find enough information and data regarding the authors angles in scientific sources, I also used popular science sources as websites and articles published at different websites. To get more data I also used subjectivity and interpretation as two subheadings to explain the researcher bias.

Hence, the following literature review focuses on research about the subjective interpretation of an author when writing a case study and how the chosen angle could affect the reality of the research. To get a comprehensive understanding it highlights the pros and cons of case studies and pays attention to different meanings around the subject. It also briefly explains case studies to get an insight into what the topic is based on.

For the purpose of this article I search keywords as “case study”, “case studies”, subjectivity”, “definition”, “angles in case studies” and “limitations of case studies”

Literature Review
The definition of case study research
Firstly we need to define the term “case study”. According to Easton (2010) it is a term that is difficult to concretizes as it include quite multifarious forms of research methods. Despite that, he claims that the sampling mode defines the case research. A case study is a sample of one. According to Ellram (1996), a case study research focus on holistic situations in real life setting. They are often confined to a specific organization or industry. In literature about case studies different authors refers to case studies in different ways; method, a strategy, a approach. (Simons, 2009)
Solberg Soilen and Huber (2006) also claim that there is no unambiguous definition of what a case study really are. But it is not only the definition that is unambiguous there is also disagreement how to classify the method; some claims that it is a scientific method and some claims that it is a method for knowledge. Case studies focus on the research questions “how” and “why” and not so much on “who”, “what” and “where”. (Easton, 2010) Gerring defines a case study as “connotes a spatially delimited phenomenon (a unit) observed at a single point of time or over some period of time” (2007, s 19). Another definition is “an intensive analysis of an individual unit (as a person or community) stressing developmental factors in relation to environment” (http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/case%20study)

Unlike experimental survey or historical research, case study does not claim any particular method of gathering data or how to analysis the data. Any method can be used for this cause, which is on of the characteristics for a case study. (Merriam)

A qualitative method, like case studies, gives the scientist the opportunity to get a good insight into a social phenomenon. There is a multiplicity in how the case studies are written. The research includes varieties in case of either inductive and deductive or positivistic or interpretive form of research. (Blichfeldt & Rank, 2006)

The approach of this methodology is particular useful to employ when there is a need to get a in-depth appreciation of an issue, event or phenomenon of interest, in it’s natural real-life context. (Crowe, Cresswell, Robertson, Huby, Avery & Sheikh, 2011) Crowe et al. published a summary of definitions in 2011. This compiles some definitions that could be useful in further reading. (Crowe et al., 2011, table 5)

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tr>
<td>Stake[8]</td>
<td>“A case study is both the process of learning about the case and the product of our learning” (p.237)</td>
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<td>Yin[1, 27, 28]</td>
<td>“The all-encompassing feature of a case study is its intense focus on a single phenomenon within its real-life context...[Case studies are] research situations where the number of variables of interest far outstrips the number of datapoints” (Yin 1999 p. 1211, Yin 1994 p. 13)</td>
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<td>Miles and Huberman[23]</td>
<td>“A case study is an empirical inquiry that</td>
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<td>• Investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when</td>
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<td>• The boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident.” (Yin 2009 p18)</td>
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<td>Green and Thorogood[29]</td>
<td>“…a phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context” (p. 25)</td>
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<tr>
<td>George and Bennett[12]</td>
<td>“In-depth study undertaken of one particular ‘case’, which could be a site, individual or policy” (p. 284)</td>
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<td>George and Bennett[12]</td>
<td>“…an instance of a class of events [where] the term class of events refers to a phenomenon of scientific interest...that the investigator chooses to study with the aim of developing theory regarding causes of similarities or differences among instances (cases) of that class of events” (p. 17)</td>
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Uncertainties about case study research

Researchers in B2B-marketing have for a long time used qualitative studies in form of case studies. IMM, Industrial Marketing Management, has encouraged this form of research, which has led to many important theoretical progresses. Despite this, many debates still rages over what a “good case research is”. (Beverland & Lindgreen, 2010)

This method has been one of the most criticised ways of doing research and the least understood. (Ellram, 1996)
But without questioning theories, ideas and methods we would not be able to improve our knowledge, nor encourage scientific process. The past few years, the discussion whether to use case study research or not has been concentrated on the validity of the method and the way it is undertaken rather than how the material is presented. There is many ways you can represent the same empirical findings and the phenomena you observed. Accordingly, how you represent the results also has a big impact to how the reader of the research finds the case study and its implications convincing. The debate about whether to use case studies as a research method or not, commonly concentrates on the validity of the way in with the study is undertaken. (Borghini, Carú & Cova, 2010)

The discussion about important aspects of case study methodology is exhaustively discussed. Questions as “How are findings validated?”, “How is a case for study selected?” and “How are generalisations made from a single case”? (Johansson, 2003)
The lack of generalization has been the most criticized thing about case studies. (Ellram, 1996) Generalization means “one or a few experiences or impressions come to represent the entire class or category of events, objects or phenomenon”
(http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/generalization.html)

Beverland and Lindgreen (2010) claims that there has been a consistent improvement in how the authors of the case studies addressed issues of research quality in published studies. Merriam (2009) is even more convinced and claims that case study is the best plan for answering the research questions; its strengths outweigh its limitations.
Authors angle and the researcher bias

Everyone wants to make a good story. And for a good story, a unique angle needs to appear. If every case study sounds like to previous 200 studies, nobody will pay attention to it. (http://www.storiesthatssellguide.com/download/Top10Mistakes.pdf) Hibbard says in 2012 that choosing the most compelling angle is important when writing a case study. It should be interesting to the readers and the media and it should put the company in a positive light, if the case study is about a company. (Hibbard, 2012)

But, it is very possible for the author to form a bias when conducting a case study. The bias could be for the subject, the form of data collection or how the data is interpreted. This is normal as the researcher is a human and it is normal for our kind to have subjective thoughts. This makes the researcher lose his perspective as an outsider. He becomes subjective instead of objective. (https://www.universalclass.com/articles/business/a-case-studies-strengths-and-weaknesses.htm) The objectivity of a case study is a problem that has been criticized. (https://www.ukessays.com/essays/psychology/limitations-of-case-study-approach-psychology-essay.php?cref=1)

The selection of category that a researcher makes, to chose of an angle, in his qualitative study is a form of sampling that focuses the researcher's attention, interest, time and energy in a individual direction and way. The product that comes from research is an outcome of decision we make about what to sample. Peshkin explains the individual perception as different lenses. He says that we never are free of lenses and that researchers are replete with shaping or even determining values, attitudes, preferences and experiences. Without knowing, we naturally look for what recurs and taking note of what we are perceiving that we have perceived before in more or less the same way and circumstances. (Peshkin, 2001)

And there has always been a debate about if the authors is writing the report from an individual angel rather than focusing on the actual reality. There is no use in a case study that is written 100% descriptively. Every analysis is built on the individual experiences and the theoretical knowledge a writer possesses. (Solberg S. & Huber, 2006) The researcher should describe and explain – i.e., interpret. Without the interpretation the research finding not going to have a meaningful presentation. (Murphy, 2014)
Flyvbjerg (2006) writes in his study that a common misunderstanding about case studies is that “the method maintains a bias toward verification, understood as a tendency to confirm the researcher’s preconceived notions, so that the study therefore becomes of doubtful scientific value” (s.17) He also claims in his article that this bias, bias towards verification, is general in all studies by humankind. But in the alleged deficiency of the case study is that they gives more space for the researchers subjective judgement than other methods. This kind of criticism is useful according to the writer as it makes us aware about an important issue BUT experienced researchers often sees this critics as a lack of knowledge and that the ones who criticizes does not know what is included in a case-study research. The benefit of using a case study is that you can zoom in on a real life situations and test views directly in relation to phenomena as they unfold in practise.

He ends up with the following sentence “The case study contains no greater bias toward verification of the researcher’s preconceived notions than other methods of inquiry. On the contrary, experience indicates that the case study contains a greater bias toward falsification of preconceived notions than toward verification.” (s.21)

To resume above discussion, the conclusion in this research regarding this misunderstanding is that this bias of verification isn't bigger in case studies than any other method. (Flyvbjerg, 2006)

Another author, Diefenbach, (2009) claims that the researcher influences the internal validity of the data. It is the simple fact that each person perceives, sees and interprets the world subjectively. This has lead many researchers into relativism and away from the notion of truth. This does feel so assuring for the case of validity in social sciences even if it is a good explanation of the nature of the qualitative research.

Every day, people learn that there are no such thing as the “one and only truth” and that as soon as human beings are involved objectivity loses its meaning.

The selection of data will be the first problem in the internal validation. Only a fraction of what has been said in interview and what has been observed can appear in the paper. Often these case studies runs over several weeks or even month so it is a huge amount of data that couldn’t possible be written down in the publication. The decision about what data that should be included in the study, and what data to exclude is a qualitative problem. There is no formula pointing at the importance and relevance of the data neither how they relate to each other. This is where qualitative researchers differ from the quantitative ones.
Which data to be included is decided by the researcher and it is the issue. The writer proposes in his article that two (or more) researchers should create the material independently so that they could compare the results and from there be able to come to a conclusion. But, the problem still remains - the subjective choice of including or excluding material. (Diefenbach, 2009)

It’s a legitimate question to ask about the researchers subjectivity (Willis, 2014). The longitudinal aspect and vast amount of data being collected can open up possibilities for researcher bias. (https://jrwpsychology.wordpress.com/2012/02/05/case-studies-the-strengths-and-the-limitations/)

This bias can affect the selection and interpretation of evidence within cases, which could lead to competing or contradictory interpretations by different researchers studying the same case. It is important be aware of this problem and to avoid it as much as you can by explicitly considering a wide range of alternative explanations for a case and doing systematic process-tracing on these alternatives. (Bennet, 2004)

Guba and Lincoln describe a concern about case studies in 1981 as “unusual problems of ethics. An unethical case writer could so select from among available data that virtually anything he wished could be illustrated” (p. 378). This highlights a potential bias that is that an author could theoretically find something he wants to find even if its not the reality and this is a bias that the readers, and the author, should have in mind. (Guba & Lincoln, 1981)

Taylor, Dossick and Garvin (2011) makes a similar statement that strong criticism is pointed against case studies because of deficient precision, quantification, objectivity or rigor or have allowed a bias view to influence the direction of the finding. The last critic mention is the one we focus on in this paper.
Another disadvantage by using case studies is that it contains the study of observations and perception of one person. Therefore there are chances that the person presenting the case study may completely present it in one manner missing other aspects completely. (Slideshare.net, may 2014)

The conclusion above might sound like a negative aspect of the case studies but there are always two sides of the same story. It is also a great strength to have a subjective dimension in qualitative researches. If Galileo hadn’t had the interest to construe and interpret the same data in a way totally different to his colleges we would still believe that we are the center in the Milky Way. (Diefenbach, 2009)

Hibbard (2009) who is positive about the researchers angle, claims that you have to choose an angle that will maximize the draw. It doesn’t matter what kind of story you are writing. She lists up a few points that may be useful to consider when choosing their angle:
- Who is your audience and what do they care about?
- What angles are most compelling to you audience?
- How do you plan to use the story and what angles are the most effective to that?

Analysis
There are many opinions about a writer’s angle of qualitative research as a case study. Many authors in the literature used in the chapter above sees subjectivity and lack of generalization as a major drawback of this type of study. (Taylor et al., 2011) But there is also another view of it since some believe that an angle in the case studies is essential to make a good and interesting research. (Hibbard, 2009)

I did not find any articles that totally rejected the use of angle because of its impact on subjectivity. On one hand we have Hibbard (2012) who claims that you should use the angle to create interest and that without this there will be a study like any other and that it will not interest anyone. This goes hand in hand with what Murphy says in 2014 which is that is has to be a interpretation or otherwise the finding is not going to have a meaningful presentation.

Some of the articles studied claims the individual interpretation as a positive part in the writing as this may lead to new discoveries. There are also articles claiming the opposite - that case studies has a clear bias.
Some of the literature in the literature review explains that we cannot get away from an individual interpretation to 100 per cent as we all have an individual way of looking at the world. The authors individually formed questions/items and made the interpretation of the answers and this will always have some subjective angles.

Even if we do not know it, we have individual lenses that individualize or researches even if it isn´t obvious for the researcher himself. (Peshkin, 2001)

**Conclusion**

There is no concrete answer on my research question. Different authors are claiming different things. But all articles is some how explaining that there is no way to get rid of 100% subjectivity. The difference between the authors is if there is a positive aspect of it or not.

Solberg and Huber (2006) and Hibbard (2012) is consistent with that one can not write a 100 per cent descriptive case study and that the author has to choose an angle to write an interesting research study.

If you study the guidelines Hibbard published online in 2009, she wants the author to choose an angle that is most promoting for your target audience. This could have an impact on how the actually reality is perceived, both by the author but also by the readers of the case, since it will probably influence how the case study is written, as the authors will make an interpretation that fits the angle.

As a conclusion from this research is that as all humans, and therefore also researchers and authors of studies, have an unconsciousness that plays a part in everything you do and that is something that we cannot get away from there will always be some research bias in case studies. If that is a positive or negative bias, are there different thoughts about.

**Implications**

In this study, the results achieved indicate that there is different thoughts about the authors angle and that it could have both positive and negative impact on the study from a scientific perspective.
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