

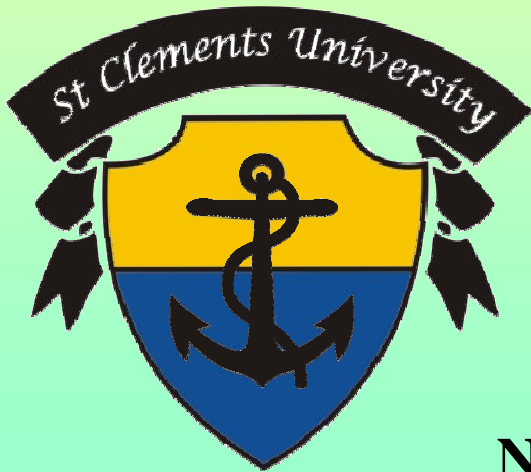
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DEBATING THE ‘CASE STUDY’ DILEMMA: CONTROVERSIES AND CONSIDERATIONS

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Abderrazak Dammak*

“Good studies should be read as narratives in their entirety.” -- Flyvbjerg

PART I

INTRODUCTION

Case studies have been subjected to both positive attributes and negative criticisms. Accordingly, there has been a growing academic discussion and debate about the usability of the case study with regard to its reliability. It has been accused of being a less rigorous, undependable, and ungeneralizable research method. The condemnation has led scholars and professionals among the researcher community to raise viewpoints that represent different schools of thought. Each school demonstrated its perception regarding the debate, of course with some concern. Whereas a section of researchers or scholars encourages the method as a useful approach, the other emphasizes its argument based on, among other things, what they call ‘lack of reliability’ of the case study, particularly external validity – whether a study carried out in the approach could indeed be generalized.

These conflicting perceptions of scholars and experts have not spread without some cost to students’ views, creating among them doubts (or disturbance if you may like) over the credibility of the method. The general hostile attitude by a section of authors towards the method, which is taught as part of the compulsory research methodology subject, nevertheless treats the method as an inferior quality of investigation. On the basis of that reality, this essay intends to contribute a few reasons why teachers should regard the case study as a trustworthy and transferable approach, given that it is conducted with its specifically relevant purpose, environment, patience, and the flexibility it requires through the process.

From the background of the aforementioned complexities, we will discuss the subject by using various sources selected from the available literature, but mainly hinging on Flyvbjerg’s work (2006 & 2011), other scholarly literature, as well as personal experiences encountered while conducting case based studies. Therefore, the next section, Part II, will open the discussion with the scope and definitional dilemma of the case study, followed by Part III whose task will be a demonstration of the divergent scholarly viewpoints. We then move to Part IV which will consider some reasons to encourage the use of the case study while Part V will conclude the discussion.

PART II

SCOPE AND DEFINITIONAL DILEMMA OF THE CASE STUDY

According to a section of scholars and experts among the community of researchers, the problem with the case study begins from its lack of conventional definition. Punch (2005) acknowledges the difficulty of defining case studies. He even quotes Stake who defines it as a “study of a bounded system, emphasizing the unity and wholeness of that system, but confining the attention to those aspects that are relevant to the research problem at a time” (pp. 144-145). According to Punch, the objective of the case study is to understand cases in depth in their natural settings without neglecting their complexity and content. Similarly problematizing the definitional scope of the case study, John Gerring (2004:342) indicates that the more the academics tried to frame an appropriate definition for the “case study”, the more they extended the complexity, thus creating what Flyvbjerg (2011:302) termed as “definitional morass.”

A similar view is held by Merriam (1998:19) who highlights the existence of “much confusion as to what constitutes a case study.” The perplexity has ushered in a crucial ideo-methodological debate -- from theory and definition to the effectiveness of its application and reliability of data presented by the method. For instance, Webster’s Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language (2001:229) defines the case study as “the gathering and organization of all relevant material to enable analysis and explication of individual units, as of a person or family” -- a narrow scope, though it contextualizes the social concern.

Merriam-Webster’s Online Dictionary (2009) explains it as “an intensive analysis of an individual unit (as a person or community) stressing developmental factors in relation to environment.” Macmillan English Dictionary (2002:208-9) writes that case study is “a piece of research that records details of how a situation develops over a period of time.” It also presents the method as “a set of events that is a good example of a particular idea or situation.” Schramm (1971), quoted in Yin (1994:11-12), bases the description on what the case study actually does, suggesting that its function is “to illuminate a *decision* or set of decisions: why they were taken, how they were implemented, and with what result” (Yin’s emphasis). Abercrombie et al, (2000:41) delineate it as:

The detailed examination of a single example of a class of phenomena, a case study cannot provide reliable information about the broader class, but it may be useful in the preliminary stages of an investigation since it provides hypothesis, which may be tested systematically with a larger number of cases.

The connotation, as expressed here by Abercrombie and friends, alludes to what some would call the

absence of generalizability of the results, in other words its application to other phenomena of the same category. However, Flyvbjerg (2011:220) criticizes that explanation as “grossly misleading.” Despite that, a further extrapolation evident in Abercrombie et al, (2000:41) reads: “Sociologists, who use techniques of qualitative research such as ETHNOGRAPHY or PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION, which are time-consuming and cannot easily be delegated to research assistants, almost invariably choose the case study method.” Abercrombie and colleagues also clarify that in this approach, data collection techniques such as surveys could be utilized in achieving desirable results. More importantly, they emphasize that the method “may provide data of a richness and detail that are difficult to obtain from more representative research designs” despite that they sound critical of its “lack of generalizability.” (Emphasis in original)

According to Best and Kahn (2004:193), “The case study is a way of organizing social data for the purpose of viewing social reality.” In that capacity, it bears the task of investigating “a social unit as a whole.” They suggest that the unit could be a group, an organization, an individual, may be a person, or a family. In essence, Best and Kahn (2004:193) assert that “[t]he purpose is to understand the life cycle or an important part of the life cycle of the unit.” On the detailed function of the case study, they remark, “The case study probes deeply and analyzes interactions between the factors that explain present status or that influence change or growth.” Soy (1997) explicates the case study as a method capable of conducting an empirical investigation in the context of real life situation, with possibilities of triangulation of methods, tools, and techniques “in order to strengthen the research findings and conclusions” (www.ischool.utexas.edu).

Bromley (1986:295) seems to concur with the broader definitional framework and informs, “A ‘case’ is not only about a ‘person’ but also about that ‘kind of person,’” a connotation whose objective is situated around the enrichment and deeper understanding i.e. the specificity of the subject under study. Kothari (2007:35) extrapolates, “The main purpose of such studies is that of formulating a problem for more precise investigation...” And according to Browne (1976), since the investigator of an exploratory research starts without a particular hypothesis in mind, it is not clear where such a study will end. Expanding the depth and breadth of the importance of the case study from the perspective of business studies, Gummesson (2000:1) contributes: “Qualitative methodology and case studies provide powerful tools for research in management and business subjects, including general management, leadership, marketing, organization, corporate strategy, accounting, and more.”

An alternative explanation by Neale et al, (2006:3) enlightens, “The case study gives the story behind the result by capturing what happened to bring it about.” By scope, Neale and friends believe that the case study

“can be a good opportunity to highlight a project’s success, or bring attention to a particular challenge or difficulty in a project,” hence detail as an important factor. A similarity is also evident here as Stake (1995:2) classifies the case study as “an integrated system,” while Miles and Huberman (1994:25) describe it as “a phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context.” MacDonald and Walker (1977:181) categorize the approach as “the examination of an instance in action,” while in Yin’s (2003:1) explanation the preference would be “when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon or within some real life.”

In a well corroborated argument, VanWynsberghe and Khan (2007:80-81) introduce a convincing and scholarly articulated definition of the case study as “a transparadigmatic and transdisciplinary heuristic that involves the careful delineation of the phenomena for which evidence is being collected (event, concept, program, process, etc.)” Important in VanWynsberghe and Khan’s description is, among other aspects, the term “heuristic”, which Merriam (1998:30) had interpreted substantiated as follows:

Heuristic means that case studies illuminate the reader’s understanding of the phenomenon under study. They can bring about the discovery of new meaning, extend the reader’s experience, or confirm what is known.

Moreover, VanWynsberghe and Khan (2007:81) explain “transparadigmatic” according to the case study’s relevance to any kind of study “regardless of one’s research paradigm,” while justifying their use of the expression “transdisciplinary” on the aspect of versatility in that “the case study has no particular orientation; that is, it can be used in social science, science, applied science, business, fine arts, and humanities research.” More importantly, though, VanWynsberghe and Khan (2007:81) tend to disagree with the various descriptions of the case study as “method”, “strategy”, “research design”, or “methodology”. The disagreements over the definition swell the complexity into a broader scholarly rivalry, as we shall analyze in the ensuing segment.

PART III

THE IDEOLOGICAL DIVERSITY OVER THE CASE STUDY

Jared Diamond (1996:6) attacks the merits of the case study on grounds of lack of verification, accusing it of suffering from a “crippling drawback.” The reason for the weakness in verification is attributed to the denseness of the long narratives that embody the case study. However, Bacon (1953) and Barlow (1958) do not see this trend as a deficiency specific to the case study only but as a reality extant in other methods and phenomena. Hamel (1993:23) accuses the case study of what he calls “lack of representativeness”, “lack of

rigor” which he relates to “the problem of bias” inherent to “the subjectivity of the researcher.”

British sociologist Anthony Giddens acknowledges the importance and usability of the case study only in certain circumstances and not in others. Giddens believes that it is valuable when done “across a wide range of action-contexts” (1984:328). But in a sharp divergence, Flyvbjerg (2006:225) invokes a historical fact: “Galileo’s rejection of Aristotle’s law of gravity was not based upon observations ‘across a wide range’ and that the observations were not ‘carried out in some numbers.’” As he further corroborates, “It was a matter of a single experiment, that is, a case study, if any experiment was conducted at all” (Flyvbjerg, 2006:225).

The “[t]raditional prejudice” (Yin, 1994:9) against the case study continues as Dogan and Pelassy (1990) affirm that if a case cannot be generally hypothesized it cannot be controlled and therefore becomes insignificant. Campbell and Stanley (1966:6-7) depreciate the case study as an approach which is nothing but “illusory upon analysis,” thereby disqualifying it as a strategy ethically unsuitable to be used for “theses or dissertations in education.” Hoaglin et al, (1982:134) observe that despite the inherent ideological morass and problems surrounding it, yet “the case study receives a good deal of approbation it does not deserve.”

In order to solicit a fair trial for the case study, Flyvbjerg (2006:223) identifies not only the pitfalls in the critics’ concepts, but reasonably elaborates on the advantages of the method and its historical role in the sciences. He states, “Context-dependent knowledge and experience are at the very heart of expert activity.” From another dimension, Flyvbjerg elucidates the issue with a ‘mild’ counter-attack against the critics of the case study as follows:

Concrete experiences can be achieved via continued proximity to the studied reality and via feedback from those under study. Great distance from the object of study and lack of feedback easily lead to a stultified learning process, which in research can lead to ritual academic blind alleys, where the effect and usefulness of research becomes unclear and unstated. As a research method, the case study can be an effective remedy against this tendency (2006:223).

Elsewhere responding about the alleged deficiencies, Flyvbjerg (2011:309) argues, “...experienced case researchers cannot help but see the critique as demonstrating a lack of knowledge of what is involved in case study research.” Instead of seeing the enormity of the case study data as a weakness, he suggests that “a particularly ‘thick’ and hard-to-summarize narrative is not a problem. Rather, it is often a sign that the study has uncovered a particularly rich problematic” (Flyvbjerg, 2011:311).

In an article he takes an issue with Mathew Miles (1979), Yin (1981:58) registers, “Case studies can be done by using either qualitative or quantitative evidence. The evidence may come from fieldwork, archival records, verbal reports, observations, or any combination of these.” Yin (2003:2) argues that basically the necessity for conducting a case study emanates from “the desire to understand complex social phenomena” on the basis that “the case study method allows investigators to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events” as they unfold in their complexity as a whole.

Nisbet and Watts (1984) (in Cohen et al, 2003) discuss on the strengths and weaknesses of case studies arguing that they are intelligible as they speak for themselves and can be understood easily. They also add that case studies are strong on reality and provide insights into similar situations and cases. However, contrary to the advantages, Nisbet and Watts (1984) (in Cohen et al, 2003) claim that case studies suffer from weaknesses in that they cannot be generalized except where other researchers see their application. After analyzing literature across various disciplines, Flyvbjerg (2006:221) conceptualizes “five misunderstandings about the case study” that impacted negatively on the method:

Misunderstanding 1: General, theoretical (context-independent) knowledge is more valuable than concrete, practical (context-dependent) knowledge.

Misunderstanding 2: One cannot generalize on the basis of an individual case; therefore, the case study cannot contribute to scientific development.

Misunderstanding 3: The case study is most useful for generating hypotheses; that is, in the first stage of a total research process, whereas other methods are more suitable for hypotheses testing and theory building.

Misunderstanding 4: The case study contains a bias toward verification, that is, a tendency to confirm the researcher’s preconceived notions.

Misunderstanding 5: It is often difficult to summarize and develop general propositions and theories on the basis of specific case studies.

Another proponent of the case study, Bailey (1992) offers a good description of the relationship between experiments, generalizations and the case study method; an argument that offers more fertile ingredients to the value of the case study as an appropriate method of research, useful and unequalled in its context. In the same line of thought, Jane F. Gilgun (2011) (www.scribd.com) constructively defends, “The findings of case studies...are generalizable. The case itself is unique but the learnings can be applied to other situations.” Gilgun (2011) further clarifies her argument by drawing upon two distinct varieties of generalization: “Probabilistic generalization” which uses randomized sampling and

“generalizing from one case to another” which, unlike the former, does not require random sampling.

In the context of Gilgun’s argument, what is essential in case studies embeds more to the transferability of the learning acquired from the events and incidents in a case; the experience gained and its application in a new but suitable situation. Hence, it is suitable since it provides an essential type of generalizability; that of the learning and knowledge of what was achieved rather than probabilities or figures enumerated according to samples observed, determined (or predetermined in certain cases) and arrived at with a specific conclusion.

On validating data

The disparagement leveled against the validity of the case study did not pass without defense. For instance, Flyvbjerg (2006:233) portrays that the benefits of the case study can be measured according to the degree at which investigators are satisfied (or dissatisfied) with the outcome of their study. He also argues that the validity of a study is dependent on its ranking by others who share some commonality in the discussion to which the study has contributed. In the same theme of contention, another proponent of the case study, Lisa Peattie (2001:260), postulates that in a case where the researcher attempts to summarize detailed data which contains “mutually exclusive concepts,” there is a possibility that “the very value of the case study, the contextual and interpenetrating nature of forces, is lost.” As Gillham (2000:2) had also suggested earlier, “all evidence is of some use to the case study researcher: nothing is turned away.”

Flyvbjerg (2006) observes the phenomenon from another perspective; that of the rationale behind the presentation of the case study in its holistic nature so that different readers will make their own meaning of the data. Accordingly, the study has to be presented with its varied perspectives “like life itself” so that “the different things in the case” will either attract or repel the various readers. The opportunity in the presentation of this kind of rich data is that “[r]eaders will have to discover their own path and truth inside the case,” rather than delivering to them a personal analysis of a phenomenon. Flyvbjerg clarifies his point here: “Case stories written like this can neither be briefly recounted nor summarized in a few main results,” the allusion being that “[t]he case story itself is the result” (p. 238) – in this manner reaffirming Peattie’s postulation demonstrated above.

In order to overcome the alleged weaknesses of case studies and qualitative research in general, Lincoln and Guba (1985) (in Seale, 2000), suggest that interpretive researchers try to establish trustworthiness of the research. First, in an attempt to build credibility, they can adopt member checks technique. They can ask participants for clarification of some issues in their diaries, interviews, and later confirm with them the transcribed interviews. Second, dependability and

confirmability can both be achieved by auditing. Subsequently, auditing can be guaranteed by giving the translated parts and transcriptions of interviews to independent data coders to check the content. Finally, by presenting the attitudes of the different participants, researchers can achieve authenticity, which can be demonstrated as a proof that researchers represent different realities.

Furthermore, researchers can use Miles and Huberman’s (1994) data organizing techniques which consist of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Data reduction, which is the process of selecting, focusing, and transforming the data can be used to reduce and organize data. Researchers can code and classify data into themes. Data display, which includes the use of charts and graphs, can be used to organize information. Conclusion drawing and verification refers to the researcher’s efforts to give meaning and interpret data. In addition, researchers can compare data collected from different tools for evidence of convergence and divergence, according to the realities.

PART IV

REASONS TO CONSIDER THE CASE STUDY

Punch (2009) presents four characteristics of case studies. First, the case has boundaries as it is a bounded system. Therefore, boundaries between case and context should be identified. Second, researchers should identify what “the case is a case of” to determine the unit of analysis. Third, researchers should preserve the integrity, unity, wholeness of the case. The last characteristic is the use of several data collection methods from multiple sources of data.

Despite the criticisms of the case study for weaknesses, Hitchcock and Hughes (in Cohen et al, 2003) detail the hallmarks of a case study by stating how the method is concerned with a lively description of events, provides a chronological account of events and blends description and analysis of events. They add that it seeks to understand an individual’s or a group’s perception of events as it focuses on individual actor or groups. It also highlights specific events by trying to portray the wealth of the case in reporting it. Cohen and colleagues (2003) compare case studies to TV documentaries as they strive to give thick descriptions of the participants’ thoughts, feelings, and lived experiences.

Among others, one of the reasons for considering the case study is that, in a research project, it is utilized as a means or method of exploring what lies inside the phenomenon under investigation. It intends to focus critically on an in-depth, heuristic exploration of the operations and activities of an organization, a person or any other unit of a larger component. That is, although from a certain perspective the case study has the potential “...to deepen understanding of the taught

subject” (Walliman, 2005:22), at research level it provides the advantage “...to examine...one segment in miniature” (Liebow, 1967:16). Therefore, what lies inside the ‘segment’ is what needs to be considered as a very significant aspect of the focus of the investigation, a part of a whole.

Notwithstanding the fact that some scholars tend to undermine the case study, there has been criticism on why scholars do not benefit from the opportunities available from the case study as a suitable method. In one such example, and invoking de los Santos & Jensen (1985), Bove and Davies (2009:230) acknowledge, “Academics have been accused of emphasizing theory in marketing courses at the expense of practice.” Due to the tendency towards theory and neglect to practical application of cases as important areas, concerned scholars have, as a consequence, criticized the inherent shortcoming that leaves a lot to be admired in the preparation of students. The neglect has prompted Bove and Davies to emphasize that examples and knowledge related to cases could be a meaningful approach “of bridging the gap between theory and practice.” Because “its strengths outweigh its limitations” according to Merriam (1998:41), the endeavor to encourage the application of the case study will enable students to prepare for the challenges ahead in their professional life (Bove and Davies, 2009) rather than the inculcation of theories.

Notwithstanding the scholarly duel over the research paradigms and methods, there is evidence to support that several studies such as by Dommeyer (1986), Hafer (1984), and Hoover (1977), reveal a high rate of student satisfaction with regard to the use of live case studies in the course of their learning programs, both as projects and in the conduct of the course. In terms of scope, Merriam (1998:26) acknowledges how case studies, both in the classroom and in the field, contributed tremendously to research in the area of education for decades. However, caution is to be exercised as to not equate the case study (as a research method) to the study of a case explored in the classroom environment, a concern revealed in Yin (1994:2), Darke and colleagues (1998), and Merriam (1998:32).

A consideration for the case study is also supported by Becker (1968:233) who suggests that the purpose of the case study is: a) “to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of the groups under study,” and, b) “to develop general theoretical statements about regularities in social structure and process.” Like other methods, the case study can use various tools and techniques as mentioned above. The interview, among others, is a perfect tool to acquire the necessary data from employees in different departments or randomly selected interviewees for any study appropriately planned and designed to use the case study. A researcher can thus design the questions and use them to the individual respondents or groups, considering

that the ample time and effort this requires has been put in place during the planning stage.

Personal experiences with the case study

As trained teachers and researchers, we (authors) have individual experiences using the case study in language teaching and learning and in business studies, in literature, as well as in ethnic studies. There have been times when each one of us encountered situations where the study would necessitate the detailing of a particular phenomenon or consideration of an unexpected phenomenon that emerged during the research process.

The flexibility of the method allowed us to give time and space to the emerging phenomena within the subject under investigation in each of our individual studies. For instance, while conducting a case study on the operations of Masafi, a mineral water producing company in the UAE, one of the authors (Mohamed) encountered a situation where he needed to obtain detailed information not only from the perspective of the company staff (as he had planned earlier) but also the most important stakeholders, the customers. The aim of the customers’ version of responses was not based on a desire to quantify, generalize or make numerical conclusions per se, but instead to incorporate into the study the intuition of the buyers of the company’s products; as and how they expressed their reactions and feelings about the product they became loyal to. At another level, their responses would help verify the data the investigator gathered from insiders and officials of the company regarding their view of customer satisfaction.

In an earlier project, Mohamed also used the case for an ethnic study on the social life of the Bantu people in Somalia and their place in a society deeply characterized by clan affiliation and kin relationships. In order to cover interdisciplinary perspectives of the subjects of study, ethnically, historically, politically, and also from the perspective of social dominance, Mohamed triangulated qualitative and quantitative research methods as well as various data collection tools and techniques.¹ In the area of ESL (English as Second Language), Mohamed similarly conducted a multi-tool, multi-technique study to discuss the nature of English language teaching and learning in Somalia and the “main causes of the predicament” related to the ESL pedagogy in that country.² Recently, specifically targeted segments of the earlier ethnic study have been conducted, where narratives of “prejudice” and “discrimination” against the Somali Bantu ethnic community was discussed.³

In another example of ESL (English as Second Language) in Arabian context, the second contributor, Abderrazak, conducted a case study in an English medium vocational training institute in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. The aim of the study was to explore the negative attitude of 38 learners towards remedial classes so as to understand the phenomenon

“from the standpoint of the individuals who are part of the ongoing action being investigated” (Cohen et al, 2003:19).

In order to explore the phenomenon under investigation, Abderrazak used two main research tools to explore reasons of students’ negative perception of remedial work: students’ diaries and interviews. The use of these two methods of data collection allowed him to explore students’ perceptions of their remedial classes. Moreover, the use of these two research tools enabled the investigator to triangulate data, which Cohen and colleagues (2003:112) define as “the use of two or more methods of data collection in the study of some aspect of human behavior.”

In order to overcome the alleged weaknesses, the researcher, Abderrazak, adopted member checks technique to build credibility (Lincoln and Guba 1985, in Seale 2000). Second, he ascertained about dependability and confirmability by giving the translated parts and transcriptions to independent data coders to check the content. Third, he guaranteed authenticity by presenting the attitudes of the participants. Moreover, he used Miles and Huberman’s (1994) techniques of organizing data including data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Finally, he compared data from the students’ diaries and interviews compared for evidence of convergence and divergence.

The inductive analysis of the data from both research tools yielded the following main reasons as students’ negative attitude to remedial classes: all participants identified themselves as poor learners and agreed that the timing of remedial classes was not appropriate; they think that remedial classes should not be scheduled as separate and additional classes after a long day of mainstream classes; they also expressed their dissatisfaction of being exposed to the same teaching materials that they had already been exposed to in the morning classes and had been having difficulty coping with.

Further, the researcher, Abderrezak, found out that the rate of attendance was very low and that most participants gave different reasons for being absent. They justified their absence by the following reasons: being tired, sleeping, swimming, playing football, family commitment, or unavailability of means of transportation. From these findings, the researcher recommended that learners should be consulted before being sent to these remedial classes. Also as part of the solution for future remedial classes, he recommended exposing students to different teaching materials that are tailored to meet their specific needs and areas of weakness rather than repeating the same old fruitless material. He also provided insightful suggestions on the role which remedial teachers can play in enhancing students’ motivation, a major cause of their negative attitude.

PART V

CONCLUSION

This essay has discussed a few factors about the debate over the case study, the misconceptions held about it and its usefulness when applied in the appropriate study. It tried to provide a description of the various views raised by scholars and researchers regarding its strengths and weaknesses, similar to any other research method. Moreover, the essay produced evidence of the usefulness of the method by referring to empirical studies conducted by the authors. Therefore, as demonstrated in the various sections, it also reaffirms scholars’ concern over the need to train students by case studies while at the same time encouraging the appropriateness of the case study method as a valuable approach that has the potential to yield remarkable results.

NOTES

1. This study was titled “The Homogeneity of the Somali People: A Study of the Somali Bantu Ethnic Community,” a PhD dissertation, St Clements University 2005. It was later published as a book under the title *The Bantu Jareer Somalis: Unearthing Apartheid in the Horn of Africa* (2008, London: Adonis & Abbey Publishers Ltd).
2. The study was an MA TESOL dissertation with the title “What are the Main Causes of the Predicament in the Acquisition of ESL in Somalia?” University of Sunderland (2005).
3. The study was co-authored with Mohmaed H. Ingiriis and Omar A. Eno under the title “Discrimination and Prejudice in the Nucleus of African Society: Empirical Evidence from Somalia.” *African Renaissance*, Vol. 10, No. 3&4, 2013.

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