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The Impact of Governance on Management Research

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School of Business & Economics

Discussion Paper

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2013/20

The Impact of Governance on Management Research

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Abstract

The rigor versus relevance debate of management research is ongoing. We contribute to this discussion by contrasting alternative assumptions about generating management knowledge and linking knowledge generation to academic governance. Specifically, we show that knowledge-by-representation dominates the field and is reinforced by the governance structures and processes guiding our academic management journals, peer review, and business school practices. We propose governance changes in academic publishing to encourage innovative research that may also generate knowledge-by-exemplification with strong ties to management practice.

Introduction

Most researchers would like their work to be helpful to managers, but managers often do not believe academic management research is of much help, or has much practical relevance. It is worrying for researchers that managers see so little value in management research. Somehow, a knowledge development process that links management research with management practice is not available (Ghoshal, 2005; Knights & Scarborough, 2010).

This paper describes why such a knowledge development process is not possible at present and considers what might be done to change this situation. We begin by identifying and contrasting alternative assumptions we make about generating organizational and management knowledge. We then consider the knowledge contained in academic management journals and how these journals use their governance structures to decide what to publish. Because journal decisions are influenced by peer review and business school practices and structures, we also discuss their impact on knowledge generation. We identify emphases and omissions that hinder knowledge development processes that might enable links between management research and management practice needs. We conclude by considering what might be done about this situation.

Knowledge Generation in the Academic Management Field

In response to recommendations by the Ford and Carnegie foundations, leading university business schools have adopted a scientific foundation of the knowledge they generate and teach (Gordon & Howell, 1959). Knowledge is developed and based on conceptual and mathematical models, or classification and categorization systems that summarize specific theories. Research also tests theories to generate empirical findings and uses case studies to demonstrate how theories apply. Business school teaching draws on this research to describe managerial issues and suggest ways of dealing with them. Chia and Holt (2008: 471) observe, however, that a “preference for abstract causal explanation over practical knowledge, and for reason and truth over what works has led to a privileging of detached contemplation over involved action.” They suggest that academic management research and teaching is based not on real world experience but on “knowledge-by-representation.” Such knowledge is developed as researchers stand back

from reality and identify variables of interest and factors that could influence them. In their research, they check whether the expected influence exists and present the results in study findings, theories, principles or frameworks for practice. Porter's (1980) five forces model identifying the factors influencing firm competition is an example of often used knowledge-by-representation.

While a "scholastic attitude" requires one to stand back from reality and establish a hierarchical subject-object relationship to develop knowledge, Sandberg and Tsoukas (1911:343) note that most managers do not generate understanding in this way most of the time. Instead, they are immersed in living situations where they experience the totality of reality including different activities and relationships. Knowledge develops as situational content becomes familiar and participants learn to cope with ongoing activities and unfolding events. The knowledge development process within a particular situational context depends on an inductive process and the knowledge acquired is context-specific, open-ended, and is also likely to be multi-dimensional reflecting the richness of the situation the manager is dealing with.

Chia and Holt (2008: 480) suggest that while immersed in a situation, people gain understanding through "knowledge-by-exemplification." This understanding is "an *in situ* acquired way of operating, a *modus operandi* that is transmitted through exemplars of social practices: style, demeanor, mannerisms, and culturally mediated dispositions." Bechky's (2006) ethnographic study of film crews describes how this process occurs. Her study explains how people who have never met work together efficiently immediately after meeting. Crewmembers are skilled specialists who know the technical requirements of their role. However, each shoot unfolds differently, and no one knows exactly what will occur or how he or she should respond. As a shoot gets underway, Bechky (2006) describes how crewmembers guide and adjust their role behaviors through trial and error interactions. Such interactions enable crewmembers to appropriately respond to whatever comes up and the different interaction behaviors allow everyone to gain knowledge-by-exemplification concerning how to work together.

Events that interrupt ongoing coping behavior require managers to adjust their situational understanding. Sandberg and Tsoukas (2011:344) note that given an interruption, managers continue to cope but some attention moves to a parallel "thematic deliberation" process where they consider what led to the interruption. If managers can understand what happened they fix it and continue coping. If the interruption leads to a broader breakdown, managers stop coping and by adopting a detached stance like a scientific researcher, they try to identify variables that may have caused the interruption. In this way, the knowledge people generate as they are immersed and coping with a situation is complemented by the knowledge they generate in response to an interruption by standing back and trying to discern what has happened. Managers stand back from a situation to generate understanding only in response to a breakdown, however.

Sandberg and Tsoukas (2011:346) suggest that to do research on how managerial coping actually occurs researchers must abandon their predetermined focus of interest. Instead of focusing on isolated variables and a pre-determined research question, studies should focus on the ongoing activities of managers. Instead of measuring variables and

relying on deductive logic, inquiry would proceed inductively and stay open to whatever a researcher observes in the ongoing coping experience. Researchers are likely to observe how managers cope with many relationships in a particular situation, how they have many ideas about what matters yet adhere to particular standards, and how they make ongoing evaluations leading to a specific managerial identity and style. Such an approach is able to incorporate a situation's organizational richness that is simply eliminated by the assumptions underlying a traditional deductive approach (Beech et al., 2010).

By separating knowledge generation from its context and relying on deductive logic, the scholastic attitude limits knowledge to cognitive understanding while essentially eliminating contextual knowing. Bennis and O'Toole (2005:102) argue, "the problem is not that business schools have embraced scientific rigor but that they have forsaken other forms of knowledge." In particular, Chia and Holt (2008: 476) note how the hierarchical detachment of the researcher who focuses on developing knowledge-by-representation, "filters out the predicaments, the intractable problems ... that characterize the actual lived world of management practitioners." Knowledge-by-exemplification, in contrast, reflects the unfolding richness of a situation and its influence on managerial coping. Working inductively, managers develop richer situational knowledge even as they may not be aware of the underlying order that scientific research can uncover through a deductive approach. There are potential benefits of a shared knowledge development process that could take advantage of both types of knowledge.

Academic Management Journals

Academic management journals publish the field's studies and serve as guardians of the knowledge the field has accumulated. The journals are usually open to a wide range of organizational topics as well as theories drawn from other disciplines. Most academic journals establish a hierarchical governance structure to review manuscripts, ensure they meet scientific standards, and to decide which ones to publish. The editorial structure is overseen by an editor and 15-30 associate editors who manage the review process and decide which papers to publish. Established scholars are appointed to editorial boards and, often, qualified scholars to serve as ad hoc reviewers. Thus, a large number of scholars invest considerable time into the peer review processes.

One function of the review process is to ensure that published work adheres to scientific standards and over time, this procedure enables findings to accumulate and establish the field's view of what is true. Studies cite previous work in the field to establish they belong in it and then explain how they make further contributions. Historically, authors in the academic management field have been expected to present research questions and then to apply scientific methodologies to develop and test theories that are generalizable to many management situations. In many studies, the research focus is on the research question and the associated variables of interest. Thus, these studies generally ignore the role managers or others may play in the study situation.

Gaining scientific recognition and legitimacy from other social science disciplines has been an important issue. To emphasize their scientific nature, many academic management journals have emphasized theory development by means of quantitative

methodologies and positivistic deductive, empirical research, often at the expense of other approaches (Hambrick, 2007). A focus on quantitative studies tends to reduce the scope and richness of problems studies can address. In the medical field, for example, after it decided to emphasize rigorous quantitative research and impose other quality controls, Horrobin (1990) reports the innovation in published work declined. As fields elect to emphasize scientific rigor, accuracy, and reliability, there may be implicit tradeoffs with regard to originality and creativity, thus limiting how a field develops.

In fact, Suddaby et al., (2011) observe that most of the theories in the academic management field were proposed in the 1960s and 1970s and they ask why new theories have not emerged. Alvesson & Sandberg (2011) suggest one reason may be that authors consider it risky to challenge top tier journal reviewers with new ideas because they perceive many to have vested interests in established theories and standards. “Gap-spotting,” i.e., the process of identifying theoretical or methodological gaps in the existing literature has become accepted as the way to position novel research ideas (Suddaby et al., 2011). Such research may enable incremental extensions and increase the chances a manuscript will get published as it will be less controversial than work that directly challenges established procedures and assumptions (Starbuck, 2003). Indeed, a focus on research gaps along with an emphasis on quantitative research limits the novelty of studies and the extent to which existing theory can be challenged. Thus, by checking adherence to scientific standards and encouraging “gap-spotting”, reviewers in the field may also suppress innovative research.

However, in spite of these shortcomings of academic publication policies, there is a wide variety of study types in the academic management field. Kilduff et al. (2011: 297) identify alternative “logics of action” that are used to discover new knowledge in the field. As shown, in academic management, the logics of action have historically emphasized a realist orientation and deductive logic. Most prominent are positivist, paradigm-based approaches to research (Kuhn, 1970). However, Kilduff et al. (2011) also identify non-realist logics that rely on inductive processes and are directed towards providing solutions to recognized problems or enabling prediction. Open-source software firms like Apache, Linux and Mozilla, for example, want their software knowledge to develop as quickly as possible (Raymond, 1999). They make beta software code available to programmers and invite them to use, extend and improve it. As they work differently, programmers contribute different changes and their combined efforts may lead to rapid improvements on many dimensions. Data-mining, in contrast, uses analytic expertise to identify patterns in large data bases that may have relevance to specific situations and for particular purposes. The research intent is to develop useful knowledge but what form it will take and the ways it may be useful is not known in advance. The process relies on an inductive logic and knowledge findings are emergent and not predicted.

Academic management research continues to position its findings as generalizations but the connections to specific practices often remain unclear (Ghoshal, 2005). Historically, it was assumed that management was a generalizable process and so the focus of research was on generalizable theories and falsifiable claims. To the extent management practices involve specialized knowledge, e.g., in technology, engineering or medicine, however, management may not be a generalizable process but rather a

specialized process more consistent with research and studies that emphasize knowledge-by-exemplification and developing rich, local, situationally relevant knowledge.

Peer Review in the Academic Management Field

The actual decision-making concerning the manuscripts that a journal publishes is done via a peer review process embedded within the journal's hierarchical governance structure. In a hierarchical structure, any position has both status and power associated with it. These characteristics are important, because as people believe they have one or the other, they behave in different ways. As Blader and Chen (2012:995) explain, "status originates externally and is rooted in the evaluations of others" and so those who believe they have status are sensitive to the views and expectations of others, e.g., authors, other reviewers, journal readers, etc., in making their decisions. Blader and Chen (2012:995) explain that power "is relatively more of a property of the actor" and those who believe they have power make decisions irrespective of what others think and based on the criteria they believe are important (See et al., 2011; Tsoukas, 2008).

Laboratory experiments demonstrate that people behave differently if they believe their hierarchical position has status or power associated with it (Blader & Chen 2012). After receiving prompts in the "dictator game" that their role had either high status or high power, for example, status participants allocated more resources to others while power participants allocated more to themselves. Another experiment found that status condition subjects tried to match rewards to performance while power condition subjects assigned rewards but ignored performance. These and other studies show that when people believe their hierarchical role has status they are sensitive to and respond to the concerns of others, whereas when they believe their role has power they give priority to their own interests and ignore others' concerns.

Peer review positions have both status and power. Depending on whether reviewers believe they have power or status, these beliefs can be expected to influence how they make and communicate their decisions. Those who believe their editorial position has status are likely to take more account of other reviewers' views, the journal's readership and provide more support for author development. Those who believe their editorial position gives them power will be less sensitive to others' views and will simply communicate their editorial decisions. As journals select their reviewers based on their academic qualifications, and not how they view status and power, one would expect the work done by an editorial board to reflect a mix of such influences.

Bedeian (2003) studied authors' experiences and their reactions to the decisions of editorial boards. He surveyed authors who had published in AMJ and AMR and he reports that 25% or more of the respondents felt that in the review process:

- recommended revisions were based on editor and/or reviewer preferences,
- they were subjected to significant pressure to conform with the editors' or reviewers' preferences if they wanted their work to get published,
- they made changes to their manuscripts that they actually felt were wrong,
- they were treated as inferiors rather than peers by editors or reviewers, and
- editors considered reviewers' knowledge to be more important than authors'.

This study confirms the experiences one would expect if some editorial decision-makers believe their role gives them power to dictate to authors while ignoring others' views. Indeed, Bedeian (2004) and Gabriel (2010) allude to the power struggles that occur as some editors aggressively impose their views on submitted papers. It seems likely that editorial reviewers utilizing the power of the position adhere to a "knowledge-by-representation" approach to generating knowledge. They can be expected to insist on realist approaches to research, clear research questions, and traditional methodologies. While this realist orientation currently dominates the academic management field, it is not an exclusive emphasis – there are clearly other points of view emerging.

Editorial reviewers mindful of the status of an editorial review position are likely to consider what authors have done and give support to novel approaches that may uncover organizational richness. Such research may require researchers to become immersed in rather than detached from organizational situations in order to observe what participants do, and knowledge generation resulting from this immersion is likely to require inductive logics, non-realist approaches, and ethnographic studies. Such research has begun to appear in management journals, but these are recent developments, whereas a lack of new theory and theories that are unable to recognize organizational richness have been with us for some time (Suddaby et al., 2011; Kilduff et al., 2011).

The Impact of Business Schools

Many societies have invested in business schools and the number worldwide has grown to over 12000 (Walsh, 2011). The impact business schools have on management practice is probably not due to the research results published in management journals but in the approach to generating knowledge that these schools currently advocate in their quest to be scientific. As we have seen, knowledge generation in business schools emphasizes a detached view that ignores the richness of real-world situations.

Walsh (2011: 217) observes how business schools are subject to an "audit culture" as though various media and society tries "to appraise the job we do." Working within an audit culture, one stands back from a situation, identifies variables of interest, assumes one can isolate these variables from their context, and then rates, ranks and compares based on these measures. That is, the approach is essentially the same as what many business school faculty use to do their academic research. An "audit culture" enables whoever is doing the assessment to make comparisons in terms of faculty research productivity and teaching effectiveness. Additionally, it makes comparisons possible across institutions, e.g., in terms of their graduation rates and the salaries earned by graduates, or with respect to academic management journals in terms of the size of their readership and their impact on the field. Just as research studies using this approach miss the richness of organizational life, so also an "audit culture" misses much of the educational richness that faculty provide and students experience in business schools.

Comparisons lead to competition and pressures to do well according to measured variables. This is consistent with agency theory ideas (Jensen & Meckling, 1976) with superiors holding the hierarchical position to monitor and sanction faculty. As in peer

reviews, university managers may believe a hierarchical position gives them power or status. Depending on what they believe, we expect to see either the use of power leading to self-centered behavior, or behavior designed to support subordinates and others. Certainly within business schools, a dean who sees hierarchical position as giving power will generate pressures on faculty to perform according to established standards. As a result, publication volume will go up, but faculty, in response, will develop strategies to beat the system. Walsh (2011) notes, for example, how over the years more papers in academic journals have multiple authors allowing all co-authors to increase their publication volume. Studies by Bedeian et al. (2010) and Honig and Bedi (2012) report that many business school faculty members are involved in plagiarism incidents, data falsification, and even the outright fabrication of results. Such behaviors suggest that the governance structures of our academic institutions do not lead to effective management behaviors and results and should be changed so that more innovative research is possible.

Changing business school governance is difficult, however, because the knowledge generation processes described operate not just in the administration of business schools but also in many business firms. Governance according to agency theory has a considerably longer tradition in business than in academe (Jensen & Meckling, 1976). Just as researchers assume they can isolate variables of interest from the context where they were generated, managers when influenced by agency theory and related concepts taught in business schools often make similar assumptions and block out the richness of many organizational situations in the process. Therefore, apart from the “scholastic attitude” prevailing in university contexts, one additional reason for business schools being slow in changing their current governance processes is that they only mirror the “audit culture” that dominates many business organizations.

Discussion and Conclusion

People generate knowledge based on different processes. The output of one approach is knowledge-by-exemplification and this is what people most often use to make sense of their daily lives. The process is an ongoing one and depends on directly coping with the activities and participants in a particular situation and it relies largely on inductive thought. The alternative process requires one to stand back from reality and rely on deduction to generate a conceptual output – knowledge-by-representation – that strips away local detail to uncover relationships that affect important outcomes.

The order in which these processes occur is important. If coping activities in a situation are interrupted, people stand back and use deduction to see if they can work out what has gone wrong. As this order occurs, the two knowledge-generating approaches naturally complement one another. If one begins with knowledge-by-representation, however, just how this knowledge is relevant or should be applied in a specific situation, particularly if one is unfamiliar with this situation, is not clear. As managers direct action based on abstract knowledge-by-representation, it is quite possible they will not appreciate the rich possibilities in local situations and will take inappropriate actions.

In terms of the impact of the academic management field on management practice, this influence does not seem to be attributable to research findings. Rather the

main impact may be in legitimating a knowledge generation process that begins by standing back from reality and picking the variables one is interested in monitoring while ignoring the interconnected detail that defines organizational life and reality. Just as research using a traditional scientific approach necessarily overlooks much of what is real, so does this parallel way of managing for which, perhaps inadvertently, the academic management field provides key support.

What can be changed? Maybe the best that can be done in the current situation is to enable us to better see the directions in which the academic management field is evolving. At the moment, the academic publication decision-making process is largely opaque, inaccessible, and hidden from view. This opacity means that the editorial review process remains a series of private exchanges between authors, reviewers, and editors. Since at least some reviewers exercise the power of their role to dictate to authors what they must do to get published, authors may fear reviewers and be reluctant to offer new ideas that may be seen as challenges. Additionally, challenges to established theory, as they do occur, if not published go unobserved due to the private nature of the review process. Similarly, the efforts of reviewers who see the editorial role as responding to and supporting new approaches to develop the academic management field will also remain inaccessible and hidden from view.

Yet with modern technologies, these processes could all be made transparent. The Internet provides limitless storage and so all of the material associated with a publishing decision in academic journals can be put online as a record of what occurred so that this data is available to identify ongoing and emerging publication patterns. We propose that for the benefit of the field, authors, and possibly managers after the peer review process is complete, all correspondence associated with a particular publication decision should be made available on the Internet. This would allow the processes used to manage and direct the academic management field to be observed and analyzed by all interested in the field.

The double blind review process by qualified scholars generally enables an objective and fair review and should be maintained. But sometime after a review process is complete and a final publication decision has been made (e. g., perhaps a year later) there seems to be no further advantage from maintaining secrecy and so all exchanges associated with the paper including the names of reviewers and authors could be posted on a journal's Internet archive site. There are many benefits to such a modification of the governance system towards more transparency. Reviewers, for example, will generate a public record of how they review, making it possible to identify those who rely on the power of their position to exert their own views in contrast to those who also consider the views of others as they reach decisions. Over time, this would likely eliminate the behaviors and concerns that Bedeian (2003) identified.

The archiving of work submitted to journals would also enable researchers to see how the field is evolving and, in particular, the ideas being explored at the periphery of the field. While journals would still publish the best work that adheres to their standards, work at the periphery may provide clues about new issues that are being explored and issues relevant for management practice. Currently, this information is unavailable and

making it available might enable researchers to take advantage of such ideas, to research the richness of organizations more, and so enhance field progress.

To encourage the development and publication of work at the periphery, we propose a second modification of the governance system in academic publishing: a redistribution of power between journal editors and authors. Top tier journals currently have implemented a policy where a manuscript can be submitted to one journal only at a particular point in time, the reason often given is to avoid reviewer overload. However, this one sided distribution of power not just encourages editorial decisions based on hierarchical power; it also severely disadvantages authors who criticize existing and accepted theory and suggest potentially valuable alternatives. To enable a more balanced distribution of power, we suggest that authors should be permitted to submit their work to multiple journals simultaneously. If this number is limited, for example, to three simultaneous submissions, the effect on reviewer overload should be manageable. This step, in combination with more transparency of the peer review process, can be expected to encourage more developmental reviews and the publication of more innovative and, hopefully, practically relevant research. After all, authors, upon receiving feedback on their submissions from several journals, can decide which path towards publication to pursue based on the perceived quality of this feedback.

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