

1

The Nature of Research

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Depending on your viewpoint, management and organization studies as a discipline is either as old as civilisation itself or in its infancy. Whilst it is true that we have been organizing and managing in social groups since our earliest days as hunter-gatherers, the formal study of management only emerged at the start of the last century with the seminal work of people like Henry Fayol and Frederick Taylor. Management itself is therefore an emerging profession and, in the period since these pioneering figures gained attention for their work, management has become one of the most studied phenomena of our times. Each year throughout the world, millions of people choose to study management at university or college.

In the latter stages of their programme of study, these individuals are usually required to complete a research project, dissertation or thesis. For our purposes, we will refer to any such extended piece of research-based work as a research project in the remainder of this chapter. To prepare and submit a research project, you must first conduct a piece of original research. This can be a daunting prospect and is often seen as a rite of passage during your studies. A research project typically represents the longest piece of writing that you'll have had to tackle to date. Many people find it challenging and there are common issues that most students experience as they work on their project. This book offers structured and clear advice for those at the start of the journey from a blank page to a completed research project.

We begin by thinking about the nature of management education more broadly before turning our attention to management research and the more specific challenges of conducting a research project in business, organization or management. Management implies coordination and it is possible to think of the management of time, resources and people. Mary Parker Follett's definition of management as the art of getting things done through others draws particular attention to the need to interact with others.

Henry Mintzberg argues that it is highly problematic to teach people to manage, claiming that “pretending to create managers out of people who have never managed is a sham” (2004). Yet this problem is not restricted to management since one could equally ask whether it is possible to teach someone how to become a writer or an artist. Nevertheless, management has begun to develop as a profession. Bodies such as the Chartered Management Institute offer qualifications, accreditation and chartered status in much the same way that professional bodies in engineering, medicine or accountancy have done for decades.

The evolution of management as a profession has seen an accompanying body of theory develop to shed light on how and why management occurs. Schools of Business and/or Management are commonplace in many colleges or universities and, as social scientists, those studying managers and/or management tend to recognise that they are dealing with something that is subtle, multi-faceted and very context-dependent. Given the vast range of organizational, geographic and cultural settings where management occurs, it seems obvious that what works well in one circumstance, may not work at all in another. As management researchers then, we are challenged to move beyond so called “folk theories” (Oaksford and Chater, 1998, p.166).

Broadly speaking there are two ways of thinking about management research, each of which takes a different starting point and focuses on a different primary audience. One view holds that the purpose of management research is to understand the problems facing managers. Therefore the starting point is to engage with managers and their experiences in such a way that, as researchers, we can develop insights that will enable managers to carry out their roles more effectively. Any findings from the research should be targeted at managers since the primary objective is to improve the practice of management. Consider the ways in which medical schools interact with hospitals and other healthcare providers. There is a close relationship and it is relatively uncontroversial to suggest that most medical research is aimed at providing better treatment for patients through new drugs, procedures, etc. Strange though it may seem, this view does not hold universally in management research.

Rather, a counter view exists, which holds that the starting point for any new research is the body of theory already generated about management and organizations. Here management is seen as an interesting, perhaps even important, phenomenon that merits attention. The primary audience however, comprises other academics engaged in the study of management. Knowledge, insights and theory represent suitable ends in themselves and the practice of management is a secondary concern. As the university sector has expanded, more and more business schools have been created with many thousands of academics hired to teach and to research management. One of the

consequences of this expansion has been that hundreds of new journals have been developed and the academic profession is sometimes accused of lacking engagement with the community of practicing managers in the wider world. In this chapter we will investigate these different views of management research before setting out the structure of the rest of the book.

Management as a discipline

The American academic Jeffery Pfeffer believes that those disciplines or fields of study where there is broad agreement about the nature and purpose of research tend to do better than those disciplines which are contested. He suggests that “consensually shared beliefs about the nature of knowledge and methods in a field ... guide decisions on grant allocations and publication” (Pfeffer, 1993, p. 605). Hence, whilst management research has grown hugely over the last few decades with new business and management departments springing up in universities across the globe, conflicting views about the nature of management research aren’t helpful. In fact, there is a long-running debate amongst the management research community about where to focus energy and attention. Over the years, scholars have worried about “the complex and sometimes problematic relationship between management practice and the practice of management research” (MacLean et al., 2002). Periodically, senior scholars write about this relationship (see for example Smith and Robey, 1973; Kelemen and Bansal, 2002). Susman and Evered (1978, p. 582) even suggested that we face a crisis, the principal symptom of which “is that as our research methods have become more sophisticated, they have also become increasingly less useful for solving the practical problems that organizational members face.”. Donald Hambrick, the then president of the world’s largest management research community (the Academy of Management) used his Presidential address to ask what it would be like if management research mattered to those in managerial positions (see Hambrick and Abrahamson, 1995). In the decades since he asked this provocative question, almost half the Presidential Addresses to the Academy of Management have dealt with this or a related theme.

Part of the problem is that management itself is something of a magpie subject, borrowing ideas and traditions from a range of root disciplines including but not limited to anthropology, sociology, psychology, economics and engineering. Earlier we examined the ways in which medical schools

relate to healthcare institutions. Two management scholars, David Tranfield and Ken Starkey argue that we should conceptualise management research as being like medical research (1998). Management research, they suggest, should be a process where new scientific discoveries are converted into practices that have the explicit intention of helping managers understand what works, in what circumstances and why. Schools of business and/or management should be uniquely well positioned to do this since they sit at the interface of social science, other disciplines and the wider business community.

Returning to Jeffery Pfeffer's concern, the problem is that one scholar pursuing management as applied psychology may not even be able to agree on the definition of terms with a colleague studying management as applied sociology. If the academic researchers talk past each other, what hope is there for them when communicating with practicing managers? In practical terms, the business school community has responded by disseminating ideas via two related but distinct channels. Academic research tends to appear in peer reviewed journals where it is expressed in technical language intended for an audience of other academic researchers. There are many hundreds of these outlets ranging from the highly prestigious to others that are a much less reliable source of good research. This is discussed in some detail in Chapter 3. Alongside these academic journals, the same research findings are often written in a different, more accessible format, to appeal to practicing managers. Outlets like *Management Today*, the *Harvard Business Review*, the *Financial Times* or the *Economist* often present new management ideas in a much more readable format. Perhaps the most effective means of distributing ideas about management has historically been in the form of books where sales in the tens of thousands are not uncommon for best-selling texts.

So where does this leave us? Management research is a booming industry beset by structural problems. There is little agreement on the nature and boundaries of management research. There are multiple root disciplines within the management research community and, despite calls for multi-disciplinary research, scholars face difficulties in engaging with each other. Further, the more sophisticated our theoretical and methodological approaches become, the harder we find it to make an impact on the practice of those in managerial jobs. Perhaps for this reason, practicing managers tend to read the work of gurus, who are often not academics but consultants. These are significant challenges and should not be underestimated.