OUT OF FOCUS OR INAPPROPRIATE PARADIGM CHOICE:WHAT HAPPENED TO MANAGEMENT RESEARCH?

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"Out of Focus or Inappropriate Paradigm Choice: What Happened to Management Research?" was published as a discussion article in Jidnyasa – Journal of Applied Management, 8(1) 2016 on which two commentaries – one by Dr. Kuldeep Kumar and the other by Dr. Ritika Mahajan – were published in Jidnyasa 8(2) 2016. Since no further commentary was received subsequently it was decided to close the discussion with a response from the author of the original article.

Both the commentaries seemed to agree with the viewpoints expressed by the author. Several other academics from different institutions have also expressed similar sentiments through personal e-mails addressed to the author. All these would suggest a broad agreement with the current state of things with Management Research. However, except for one institution, none openly admitted that change is called for. One wonders 'why is this dichotomy?' One reason could be that human beings are caught between illusion and reality, as the mind dwells in the subjective world of ideas and concepts, but physically one exists in the world of objective reality that cannot be directly experienced or fully understood. This is further complicated by the use of reason and logic to guide the mind to truth, as they rely on language that is inadequate for describing reality and often leads to paradoxes.

Be that as it may, the issue at hand is what changes may be necessary to make management research more useful? What needs to be done to make academic research to meaningfully address practitioner's concerns?

The terms, 'relevance' and 'rigour', proposed by various authors as dual criteria for desirable management research (Aldag and Fuller, 1995; Hodgkinson and Herriot, 2002; Pettigrew, 1997; Schon, 1995; Stokes, 1997), are central to the so- called academic-practitioner gap. In order to bridge the gap one needs (i) to adopt processes of inquiry that simultaneously achieve high rigor and high relevance; (ii) research processes that strive for relevance emphasizing the particular at the expense of the general in contrast to approaches that strive for rigor emphasizing the general over the particular; (iii) a reasoned relationship between the particular and general to attain both rigor and relevance; (iv) a process of inquiry that crosses epistemological lines by synthesizing the particular and general and by utilizing experience and theory, the implicit and the explicit, and induction and deduction. Business is increasingly concerned with relevance while business

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researchers cling to a different view of knowledge. How the twain could meet? Intuitively, the interpretive - as opposed to the positivist - paradigm appears appealing to break the impasse. The interpretative approach is a particularly useful way to frame interaction between academics and practitioners. For example, Shrivastava and Mitroff (1984) addressed the goal of enhancing organizational research utilization in terms of the differing interests; assumptions and what might be considered interpretative schemes, or frames of reference, between academics and practitioners. In terms of methodology, these authors propose strategies for improving utilization, such as complementing quantitative methods with qualitative methods, including greater numbers of contextual variables in their studies, and utilizing commonplace metaphors in their analyses and implications.

Porter and McKibbin (1998) accuse business schools of a number of failings. Some of these are: (i) quantity has become more important than quality; (ii) the intended audience of most research is the academic community rather than dual community of scholars and practitioners; (iii) proliferation of arcane, trivial and irrelevant research. At a time when business needs to cope successfully with the demand of old and new economy, institutional, cultural and organizational shifts are necessary at the interface between business and universities. The process necessary to achieve such a change is a demanding one as business and universities remain very different institutions.

Scardamalia and Bereiter (2006) drew a distinction between *declarative knowledge* and *procedural knowledge* by using the words knowledge *about* and knowledge *of* something. Knowledge *of* is activated when a need for it is encountered in action. Whereas knowledge *about* is approximately equivalent to declarative knowledge, knowledge *of* is a much richer concept than procedural knowledge. Knowledge *about* production management, for instance, would consist of all the declarative knowledge you can retrieve when prompted to state what you know about production management. Such knowledge could be conveniently and adequately represented in a concept net. Knowledge *of* production management, however, implies an ability to do or to participate in various activities related to production. It consists of both procedural knowledge (e.g, knowing how to plan production schedule and execute the same) and declarative knowledge that would be drawn on when engaged in the different activities (e.g., knowledge of equipment characteristics and maintenance requirements, rules of particular events, etc.).

Levitt (1996) charges most researchers with doing research for wrong reasons of approval and ambition rather than for right reasons of excitement and challenge. Closing the gap requires creative addressal of the issues relating to research content, research process and research dissemination, as the need of the hour is to improve the opportunity space for our enterprise. Important to note is, today's business world places a premium upon knowledge as a source of competitive advantage, and pays special attention to the knowledge stocks of organizations. Dilemma before the academics is: do they cling to the values of academic fundamentalism or do they embrace a more practitioner-focused perspective?

Barry Smith (2004) observed that ontology-minded philosophers are astonished to find that that many thoughtful members of the knowledge representation and related communities have embraced one or other form of idealist, skeptical, or constructionist philosophy resulting in one or more of the following.

1. A view according to which there is no such thing as objective reality to which the concepts or general terms in our knowledge representation systems would correspond.
2. A view according to which we cannot know what objective reality is like, so that there is no practical benefit to be gained from the attempt to establish such a correspondence.
3. A view according to which the term 'reality' in any case signifies nothing more than a construction built out of concepts, so that every concept-system would in principle have an equal claim to constituting its own 'reality' or 'possible world'.

Doctrines under all the above three headings, nowadays, appear commonly in the wider world under the guise of postmodernism or cultural relativism. They contend that theories of objective reality are nothing more than cultural constructs, hence have no great utility as such.

Further, given that the field of management is *soft* (weak theoretical unity), *applied* (high variation in the institutional conditions for conducting research and low sense of knowledge progression), *divergent* (low disciplinary cohesion and identity, low sense of shared purpose among researchers, unclear boundaries) and *rural* (wide area of study with low density of researchers on particular topics), all kinds of views prevail regarding the ontological stance to be taken. For example, even for a reasonably well quantified discipline like operational research (OR) a major debate has often been on the distinction between OR as technology, OR as consultancy, or OR as science-knowledge-building-modeling activity (Ormerod, 1996). Almost every functional area has its own distinctive history and legacy. Any comprehensive exposition is well beyond the scope of this article. However, the point to be noted is, pursuit of increasingly abstract and generalized knowledge has resulted in a proliferation of self contained ancillary fields (finance, marketing, strategy etc.), although the most crucial problems faced by work organizations often occur at the interface of one or more of these disciplines, and thus tend to elude compartmentalized academic analysis entirely (Berry, 2001). Fragmentation, therefore, is another major concern in management research apart from the nature of issues being addressed.

There had been a growing profusion of theories and methodologies used in management research. Whilst representativeness, inclusiveness and theoretical and methodological diversity might be attractive ideals, Pfeffer (1993) thought these have negative consequences towards making progress. He thought that diversity means that 'anything goes' whereas progress requires some level of consensus. Probably the most striking feature on which consensus exists is, management research operates on no single agreed ontological or epistemological paradigm. It is a heterogeneous and fragmented field (Whitley, 1984; Tsoukas, 1994) utilizing knowledge and research methods often drawn from associated disciplines in social sciences. Further, Whitley (1984) points out, "the nature of management problems, as distinct from some managers' problems, receives little attention …, yet if management research is to be more than technical troubleshooting for current incumbents of dominant positions this distinction needs sustained analysis".

Firms are interested in application of knowledge rather than knowledge for its own sake. Unless B – Schools respond to this challenge they run the risk of obsolescence, and will eventually be replaced by new providers like consulting firms or corporate universities. What should one do?

Adopt an interpretive perspective and proceed? Answer may be both ‘yes’ and ‘no’. This is so because while the interpretive perspective has the capability to stand back from the contextualist - realist/positivist differences and to see people working within each of these as a distinct knowledge community, interpretive interventions for bridging the gap between these approaches can best be characterized as contextualist. Hence, the interpretive perspective falls short in offering the prospect for true integration and it lacks a clear statement of what 'knowledge' consists, other than the norms of a particular community. Despite such shortcomings, this perspective may provide a convenient vehicle for framing academic-practitioner collaboration in a specific situation. Once that happens the next question to be answered would be the epistemological choice. A dysfunctional response to this situation, in the authors' view, is either to 'retreat to the high ground of a resurrected epistemology', seeking to defend against the demands for relevance, or to yield all to relevance and to abandon epistemology in total. Instead, what is recommended is a socially sensitive epistemology.

However, the point to be kept in mind is: the human senses are limited; they determine the boundaries of the observable world. Yet, in moment-to-moment awareness of the present, there is the illusion that one perceives the whole world, rather than its fraction. One can confuse ‘reality’ with ‘appearances’ or the fragments of what can be observed. The ultimate dilemma is determining the reality behind the appearances, and ensuring that a determined reality itself is not an appearance of a deeper reality. As the world is perceived through the images formed and stored in the minds of individuals, the question is whether these images, which are just pictorial representations of objects and not the actual objects, truly represent reality and how they influence the perception and interpretation of reality. The important issue is how to free the mind from preconceived ideas, and look at every image from a fresh perspective, without any influence of prior semantic context.

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