Management research: To understand the role of epistemology in management research

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Abstract: From last several years epistemology and its principle plays vital role in the development and enhancement of social science research activity at different level. The different views of positivism are united by the epistemological principle that warranted knowledge. There are a diversity of different epistemological arrangements which decriminalize their own distinct ways of engaging with management and doing management research. Present study focused on the meaning and processes of management research as well enlighten the importance of epistemology and its role in the management research. The present work will explain the significance of relevance and rigor in management research. The main objective of this paper is to provoke debate and reflection upon the different issues in which we engage, when academician and organization doing research. Management researches and practitioners undeniably accepted that there is a gap exists between management researchers and management practitioners. This gap is main hurtles if researchers wants to implement their research findings into practice. But we know that management research always looks betterment of life through the enhancement of management process.

Key words: Management research; epistemology; knowledge; Positivism; generalizability.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Previously, researchers in management studies have been criticized for being uncritical and ill informed in their adoption of particular positions with regard to research (Whitley, 1984). This is beginning to change and some of these issues are covered in a disparate set of journals (e.g. Organization Studies; Academy of Management Review; Organization; Accounting, Organizations and Society; and Human Relations, to name only a few). Their style and language-in-use, however, are often daunting and inaccessible to those yet to be admitted into the conventions of philosophical discourse.

Nevertheless many students and researchers are still expected to read and comprehend a burgeoning literature which increasingly deploys epistemological concepts and language. For instance, in order to understand the current debate in the literature between modernists, critical modernists and postmodernists we need to understand the importance of this construct in management research. The characterization of any discipline requires the use of a conceptual schema and language. Given the extent of the debate concerning the nature of management research over recent years (ESRC, 1994),

there has been a surprising lack of use of available intellectual tools to facilitate the discussion (Tranfield & Starkey, 1998).

Management discipline continuously developed new theories to contribute the body of knowledge. Same theories are based on past research and some based on the experimental studies that are purely innovative ideas that converted into theories. The development of things is always depends on the progress of the research and research development wings of the organization, institutions or country. Research plays a vital role of in development of management theories and practices.

Our products are made by many hands and machines, our services can be delivered from remote places, our organizations can be owned and influenced by many different interests and our knowledge arises from many sources. With this separation between imaginative judgments, planning, ownership and execution comes an increasing need for coordinating wealth-creating effort across activities, times and spaces, and hence a need for management and management research is significant.

While there is broad recognition of the basic nature and extent of such management activity, and so it"s being an area of our personal and social lives worthy of study, what is far less certain is how we should understand, present and judge it. It is to pursue this understanding, presentation and judgment that the field of management research is devoted, a field that, from tradition, has been occupied by a number of disciplines from the social sciences. So to understand what we mean by managerial research we have to understand both what we mean by social science and why management as an activity is amenable to such scientific study (Holt & Thorpe, 2008).

2. MANAGEMENT RESEARCH:

There is many definition of management research which was put forward by different authors, according to Cooper and Schneider "Management research is a systematic inquiry that provides information to guide managerial decision" (Cooper & Schindler, 2007). More specifically, it is the process of planning, acquiring, analyzing and disseminating relevant data, information and insight to decision makers in ways that mobiles the organization to take appropriate action that, in turn, maximize business performance (Cooper & Schindler, 2007).

Furthermore, management research is concerned not only with „knowing what", but goes beyond this to consider questions associated with „knowing how". It is concerned to build a body of knowledge which documents, codifies and articulates a problem and solution-set concerned with understanding and improving the practice of management (Tranfield & Starkey, 1998). Long and Dowell (1989) argue that, disciplines are distinguished by the general (discipline) problem they address. The scientific discipline addresses the general (scientific) problem of explanation and prediction, the engineering discipline addresses the general (engineering) problem of design and so on. Craft knowledge is acquired by practice and example, and so is experiential (Long & Dowell, 1989).

With consider Becher"s two dimensions of social organization, each with their associated dual „sets of properties" it is now possible to use this conceptual schema to consider the nature of management research (Becher, 1989). Probably the most striking feature on which there is consensus within the discipline is that management research operates no single agreed ontological or epistemological paradigm. It is a heterogeneous and fragmented field (Whitley, 1984) utilizing knowledge and research methods often drawn from associated disciplines in the social sciences.

3. EPISTEMOLOGY AND MANAGEMENT RESEARCH:

The epistemological commitments influence the processes through which we develop what we take to be warranted knowledge of the world. Such deeply held taken-for-granted assumptions about how we come `to know' influence what we experience as being true or false, what we mean by true or false, and indeed whether we think that true and false are viable constructs. As we shall show, this is even the case where, as is increasingly popular in management and organizational research, Merton's ethos is rejected in favor of a view of science as a relative outcome of intuition, paradigm, metaphor, discourse, social convention or fashion. Even to say that there can be no reliable knowledge (in Merton's sense) beyond some ethnocentric collective endorsement, and hence cast doubt upon the relevance of epistemology as a philosophical endeavor, is paradoxically grounded in the `hidden hand' of epistemological reasoning as to why no such asocial, objective, value-free knowledge is ever possible.

No one can stand outside epistemological processes, whether they are researchers or managers. Indeed many writers have reminded us that managers routinely undertake research as they try to make sense of organizational events and phenomena or discern and evaluate possible courses of action (Mintzberg, 1973) (Schon, 1983).

In the management every management strategy, management policy and inferences, completely or openly articulates an epistemological position that approves the knowledge claims that justify its substantive content. When we describe something as „facts" we need to evaluate it in epistemological ground and then this facts can gain some kind of epistemic status. So if we take seriously the argument that a key skill that any manager should possess is the ability to reflect critically upon the modes of engagement they deploy in making sense of their experience, then the importance of epistemology to practitioners is only too evident because studying epistemology exposes to critical interrogation the often unnoticed taken-for-granted assumptions and values which influence how versions of reality are socially constructed which then influence action (Johnson & Duberley, 2013).

The seventeenth-century promise of epistemology to provide secure foundations for scientific knowledge seems a forlorn hope precisely because of circularity. For instance Otto Neurath has described this problem of circularity in terms of a nautical metaphor:

"we are like sailors who on the open sea must reconstruct their ship but are never able to start afresh from the bottom . . . They make use of some drifting timber of the old structure, to modify the skeleton and the hull of their vessel. But they cannot put into dock in order to start from scratch. During their work they stay on the old structure and deal with heavy gales and thundering waves" (Neurath, 1944).

For Neurath the problem of circularity means that we cannot dump philosophy by detaching ourselves from our epistemological commitments so as to assess those commitments objectively indeed we would depend upon them in order to undertake that task. It follows that there are no secure or incontestable foundations from which we can begin any consideration of our knowledge of knowledge -rather what we have are competing philosophical assumptions about knowledge that lead us to engage with management and organizations in particular ways. This involves an attempt at self-comprehension through beginning to notice and then criticize our own pre-understandings in a more systematic fashion while trying to assess their impact upon how we engage with the social and natural worlds (Johnson & Duberley, 2013).

4. MANAGEMENT KNOWLEDGE:

When Comte coined the term `positivism' he was expressing the enlightenment desire to rid science of what he saw to be dogma. Thus Comte (1853) identified three chronological stages in the development of knowledge: the theological or fictitious; the metaphysical or abstract; and the scientific or positive. In the first stage phenomena are explained as the product of the acts of supernatural agencies - for example God. In the second stage people attribute phenomena to a single abstract force, invisible power or underlying entity - for example nature. The third stage is characterized by the examination of the `positively given' - that which is directly available through sensory perception. At this stage Comte saw that `the human mind' rejected all religion and metaphysics as a distraction from sense-data and (Comte, 1853) confines itself to the discovery, through reason and observation combined, of the actual laws that govern the succession and similarity of phenomena. The explanation of the facts, now reduced to its real terms, consists in the establishment of a link between various phenomena and a few general facts, which diminish in number with the progress of science (Andreski, 1974).

According to Gibbons, M., C. Limoges, H. Nowotny, S. Schwartzman, P. Scott and M. Trow (1994) knowledge production system divided in to two modes one is *traditional method of knowledge production* and other is an *alternative method*. In traditional method whereby knowledge production occurs largely as a result of an academic agenda, predominantly driven through, and categorized by, associated adjacent disciplines, developing knowledge stocks largely residing in universities, guarded by „elite gatekeepers". While in the alternative method on the other hand, mode two offers a very different model of knowledge-production. The mode of knowledge-production system requires trans-disciplinarily in which team working rather than heroic individual endeavor becomes the established norm. Moreover the mode two system results in immediate or short time to market dissemination and exploitation in that knowledge is produced in the context of application and is characterized by a constant flow back and forth between the fundamental and the applied, between the theoretical and the practical. Typically, discovery occurs in contexts where knowledge is developed for, and put to, use, while results – which would have been traditionally characterized as applied – fuel further theoretical advances (Gibbons, Limoges, Nowotny, Schwartzman, Scott, & Trow, 1994).

5. RIGOR AND RELEVANCE OF MANAGEMENT RESEARCH:

Relevance and rigor in the research is very vague issue, its continuous debate on what is relevance and rigor in management research and how can we measure the same. According to Freek Vermeulen (2007) relevance is not necessarily about immediate prescription. It is not advice for some sort of managerial action that companies can undertake that will increase their profits next term by X percent. "*Relevance is found in generating insight practitioners find useful for understanding their own organizations and situations better than before*" (Vermeulen, 2007). As James March said, if a manager asks an academic consultant what to do and that consultant answers, then the consultant should be fired. No academic has the experience to know the context of a managerial problem well enough to give specific advice about a specific situation. What an academic consultant can do is say some things that, in combination with the manager"s knowledge of the context, may lead to a better solution. It is the combination of academic and experiential knowledge, not the substitution of one for the other that yields improvement (March, 2006).

According to Freek Vermeulen (2007) if we think about the relevance of our research so we should tell practitioners about our research and as a result some of these people they gained an insight they did not yet have, one that enables them to make better decision regarding their own specific company situation, then we can fell we have done our job and our research has been relevant. Researchers think that our standards of academic rigor automatically ensure relevance? Unfortunately, this is not true. "*Rigor means that the various elements of a theory are consistent, that potential propositions or hypotheses are logically derived, that data collection is unbiased, and measures are representative and reliable, and so on*". Yet it seems perfectly possible for a research work to have all this without providing any insight into the workings of real organizational life. Even empirical research can be quite detached from real organizational life, as percentages of variance explained are often notoriously low, dependent variables of little importance or not under anyone"s control, or the generalizability of a case unclear. Rigor might be a necessary condition for building theory that provides true insight into reality, but it seems not to be a sufficient one. Freek Vermeulen argues that only if theory is developed with reality in mind will it reveal true insight. Without a deep understanding of organizations and the problems they face, academics may study the wrong things, interpret results incorrectly, and generate findings that may be rigorous but too detached from reality to be relevant. Adding a second loop, with practitioners as informants as well as consumers of one"s academic research, might help people to advance the relevance of their work (Vermeulen, 2007, p. 755).

If we really think about the relevance and rigor of management research we need to translate our research to mangers. The best one can do, or so it seems, is to hope that someone else (some journalist, consultant, or lecturer) will pick up the Academy of Management Journal or some other rigorous academic journal and use and translate its contents for practitioners. As we all have a loop involving communication with fellow academics, but it is not sufficient we need second loop involving ongoing engagement with people in organization intended to develop real understanding of their circumstances, matched with continuous attempts to bring our research to them. Only a taste for such genuine engagement will enable our academic research to be of use to the people at the helms of organizations, individuals endeavoring to steer the groups of people we call firms through a complex and messy reality, in order to create wealth and, at the end of the day, a better world.

Loops of Communication
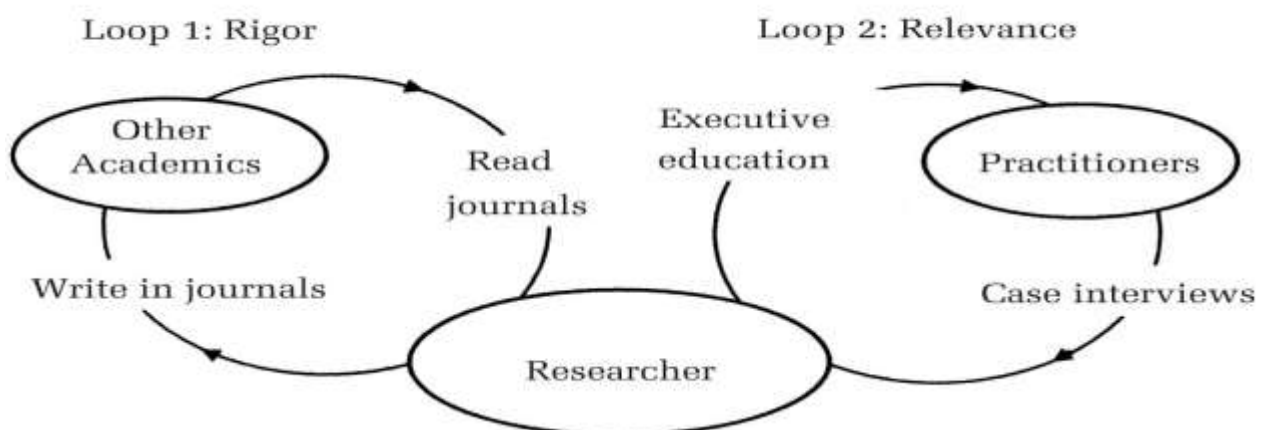
Source: Vermeulen, F. (2007). "I shall not remain insignificant": adding a second loop to matter more. *Academy of Management Journal , 50* (4), 754–761.

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION:

Management research is the process through which the academician and practitioners try to reduce the gap between them. A distinguishing characteristic of management research is that it engages with both the world of theory and the world of practice. Management researchers can locate themselves at different points in the cycle at different times but they cannot stay fixed in either the world of practice (without risking epistemic drift driven by politics and funding) or in the world of theory such as without retreating to academic fundamentalism (Tranfield & Starkey, 1998). Now a day's Management research is not limited for „know what" but it enhance its scope to „know how". According to Tranfield and Starkey, management research is concerned not only with „knowing what", but goes beyond this to consider questions associated with „knowing how". It is concerned to build a body of knowledge which documents, codifies and articulates a problem and solution-set concerned with understanding and improving the practice of management (Tranfield & Starkey, 1998).

The unhidden problem faced by management research is to transformation of management knowledge, which results of management research from theory to practice. If the management research transform the result of their management research to used in the practice or we can say that to convince or to approach mangers or organization for the applicability of findings of management research. Once the transformation is happen then the relevance and rigor of management research indirectly gain by this process.

In conclusion we can say that the academic fellow should engage with the mangers and organization, from the initial stage of management research that is from the formulation of research problem and execute management research. If this process done successively then the results of management research will more applicable and useful not only for organization but also for society at large. And these effects also help to reduce the gap to transformation of management research findings into practice.

7. ACKNOWLEDGMENT:

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