

Multi-perspective Management Research: Fusion or Confusion?

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Abstract: In our most recent project on managerial work, we are considering ways of bringing together the findings derived from quantitative and qualitative evidence. Since 1997 we have carried out extensive longitudinal surveys of a panel of 5000 managers, which we have sought to enrich with a series of some 50 intensive interviews conducted in 2003-2004. The purpose of this paper is to share with colleagues our approach to reconciling the differing paradigms of values, attitudes, needs and expectations, which some continue to argue may be incommensurable.

Keywords: management research, multi-perspective, incommensurability, quantitative, qualitative

1. Introduction

In the recent past, there has been considerable debate about the form and nature of management research. While some see management research as a 'design science' (van Aken, 2004) where concerns have been raised about management research having a 'serious utilization problem' because of its perceived low level of relevance to its user community and needing to result in more 'field tested and grounded technological rules', other management researchers would regard this either as heresy or a perspective on management research with which they would not wish to engage. A further example of the diversity of management research in the UK is that in the 2001 Research Assessment Exercise, a total of 1,582 separate journal titles were included in the RAE submissions of the 100 or so 'units of assessment' in the Business and Management field (Geary, et al, 2004). The purpose of this part of the paper is to share our perspectives on management research derived from our fieldwork and investigations specifically into managerial work. We define management research as a process for the production of knowledge that is useful in the task of managing, where knowledge is justified belief. Clearly, there are many lenses from mainstream neoclassical economics to feminist critique that we could use to bring into focus our interest in managerial work. The methods we could legitimately use could vary from large-scale surveys and their attendant statistical techniques where some statistical zealots would argue that the 'data speak for themselves' (Lindley, 2004) to participant observation, or to

critical ethnography or to discourse analysis of various organisational 'texts'.

Additionally, there are many directions from positivism to radical feminism from which to shine light to illuminate the subject matter. The discussions here centre on our decisions about which approaches to choose to study the field and, perhaps, more important on the nature of the relationships between different frameworks for analysis and their embedded tools and techniques. For example, if our objective is to develop a 'rich picture' of the changing nature of managerial work, is it possible to conduct analysis using different theoretical frameworks and then to integrate the outcomes of the parallel studies to obtain interpretations and understandings that could not be generated by the use of one disciplinary framework alone? Or does the adoption of different frameworks and different perspectives generate understandings that are incommensurable? Or does it indicate that our attempt to produce an integrated understanding is naïve and that there can be no convergence to one understanding in a world that consists of multiple and usually conflicting understandings which are conditioned by the position of different observers and participants in society? If we decide to shine the light from one direction then we might illuminate one face of our subject very clearly and only create one set of shadows but if we illuminate our subject from multiple directions we can see that our subject does not have a single face, it has multiple faces and we also create a very complex pattern of shadows.

In our work on the changing nature of managerial work, our intention is to create such a rich picture by attempting to 'light' our subjects in a more complex way. All photographers will tell you that flooding a subject with light will reduce the dimensionality of your subject in which the loss of shadow, texture and relief turns a three dimensional, complex image into a flat image where the nuances of that image and its interest are lost. Our hope is that by 'lighting our subject' in a more complex way we can develop a better understanding of the darkness, the light and the intervening shades. Again, a good photographer will tell you that taking the photograph is a technical and an easy job but arranging the lighting to reveal the subject is where the art comes into the equation. It is also very difficult to make the human subject of a photograph look natural when you are asking them to adopt a pose that they would not normally adopt and you are sticking a camera into their face.

Our desire to create new knowledge about managerial work is made more interesting by the fact that the two principal researchers have their origins in radically different approaches to the conduct of research. One has a strong background in managerial research, which is based on realism, empiricism and the collection and analysis of large volumes of hard data. To extend our analogy, this research will admit that he may have been guilty of flooding his subject with some intense lighting that may possibly have obscured more than it illuminated. Essentially, this floodlighting may have turned what is a complex, three dimensional image into a rather flat image but perhaps that is a problem which is symptomatic of a decision to adopt a reductionist approach. The other researcher eschews this approach for one based far more on qualitative evidence from constructivist stances: this will form the basis of an accompanying paper.

This part of the paper is divided into four main sections. In the first section, we outline our research field (managerial work), our prior research and our work in progress. In the second section, we outline our research objectives as a means of framing the research issues (ontological, epistemological and methodological) we have had to confront. In the third sections,

the research stance of one of the principal researchers is outlined.

2. Managerial work and why we are interested in it

The driver to our research is that there is relatively little new research being conducted into the changing nature of managerial work and managers' experiences of changing patterns and structure of work organisation. While there is research into the subject, we find much of it is dated, lacks academic rigour and is not relevant to sustainable practice. Recent work that is relevant includes that by Legge (1995); Noon and Blyton (1997) and Burchell *et al* (1999), who identify the contemporary tensions and realities of work as becoming intensified, extensified and less secure. These findings are confirmed by our 'Quality of Working Life Surveys' (Worrall and Cooper, 1997-2001). However, the base of this research was a highly empirical, realist view of the world and focused on producing statistical models that would explain, for example, the different effects of organisation change on different groups of managers. The empirical approach has implicit within it the view that all truth claims are capable of objective verification or falsification and that there is, essentially, only one truth.

Our early approach also contains some fundamental assumptions about observer neutrality, about the reliability and validity of the questionnaire items used and the ontological basis of some of the core constructs (such as organisational identification, commitment, motivation and loyalty) that either underpinned or emerged from the research. This latter point was clearly made by Johnson and Cassell (2001, p133) who argued that "Phenomena such as motivation, stress and personality cannot refer to real objects, but are merely linguistic constructs which work psychologists take to be real". Whether, for example, 'stress' exists 'out there' or whether stress has been constructed by 'stressologists' in whose interests it was to discover stress (or, if they could not discover stress 'out there', to 'invent' it so that they could use their positions of privilege as accomplished management researchers to convince us that it existed) is an interesting point and reflects much of what Foucault had to say about the nature of

mental illness. In this case, the voices of 'stressologists' become privileged in that they claim to have access to scientific knowledge which makes their opinions and renditions of what organisational life is really like appear authentic and authoritative. In retrospect, and in this context, the epistemological and ontological basis of our research went unquestioned and both were uncritically taken as given.

The epistemological and methodological basis of our early work was firmly grounded in the work psychology domain. A recent critique of research in work psychology by Johnson and Cassell (2001) raises many of the issues that we are concerned with in that the authors argue that 'work psychology still seems entrenched in the positivist paradigm' (p.126), that the 'epistemological authority' of experimental design is unquestioned and that the whole notion of the 'subject' upon which work psychology is based has been the focus of much debate in other realms of psychology – but not in work psychology. Johnson and Cassell quoted Sparrow (1999) who argued that while many 'managerial and social science disciplines (had) put themselves through a period of critical analysis' that 'strangely' occupational and organizational psychologists had refrained from putting themselves through such a period of critical analysis. They also quoted the work of Holloway (1991) who argued that the lack of a debate about the status of knowledge within work psychology was problematic in that it identified work psychology with a 'natural science' view of the world.

Johnson and Cassell (2001) went on to comment on the dangers of a lack of 'epistemological reflexivity' within work psychology which had led the field to be characterised by a paucity of theoretical perspectives if not by a theoretical orthodoxy which would ultimately determine what was publishable in certain influential journals. In addition to their concerns about a monoclonal approach to epistemology, Johnson and Cassell also commented on the methodological orthodoxy that characterises the field: they pointed out that quantitative approaches prevailed over qualitative and interpretative approaches. Additionally, they raised fundamental concerns that the

epistemological and methodological conformity and orthodoxy of the field actually constrained the types of questions that researchers were prepared to ask and, indeed, we capable of asking.

In a paper which focuses on the need for greater reflexivity in management research, (Johnson and Dubberley, 2003) contrast two distinctive frameworks in which management research is conducted: they contrast a research environment which is characterised by the adoption of a realist ontology and an objectivist epistemology with a research framework that is characterised by both ontological and epistemological subjectivism (these are Q1 and Q3 in the framework we have developed as Figure 1). They argue that the only reflexivity which takes place within Q1 is what they call 'methodological reflexivity' which is 'a localized critique and evaluation of the "technical" aspects of the methodology deployed rather than the underlying metatheoretical assumptions that justify that methodology in the first place' (p1284). Q3, on the other hand, is replete with reflexivity about the epistemological and ontological underpinnings of the research.

The argument for augmenting our statistical analysis with data that captured the lived experiences of managers is that we could gain a richer picture of the changing nature of managerial work. It would also (hopefully) complement our numerical databases with various texts for analysis. One of our objectives was to explore the value of balancing and integrating a realist-objectivist position of 'one concrete, measurable truth' with more subjectivist positions of 'multitudinous intangible, impressionistic, equally valid truths' (Noon and Blyton, 1997, p4). Rather than trying to distil a single reality, we should seek to identify realities of managerial work through the complexity and heterogeneity of managers' experiences. For example, to understand the qualitatively different positions of managers and workers identified in our earlier findings (Worrall and Cooper, 1996-2001) and in the work of others (Noon and Blyton, 1997).

Again, to reflect the work of Johnson and Cassell (2004, p.137) we concur with their views that work psychologists need to be

sceptical (or more reflexive) about 'how they engage with the world'; about the categories and constructs they often uncritically make use of; and, about the interpretations they make about behaviour in the workplace. We also concur with their view that researchers in organisational analysis need to reflect more on the epistemological and ontological bases of their work. Like Johnson and Cassell, we would argue that a more pluralistic approach to organisational analysis might not necessarily allow us to provide better answers but it might help us to ask better questions and provide a more robust basis for subsequent research.

3. The development of a research framework

Given that our objective is to contribute substantially new understandings of managerial work by painting a rich picture of it, our prime task has been to develop a pluralistic research strategy that would allow us to achieve this objective. Particularly given the differing views of the principal researchers, we argue that it was important to decide early on where the project sits within an ontological-epistemological framework (see Figure 1).

EPISTEMOLOGIES

| | | | |
|------------------|-------------------------------------|--|---|
| | Simplified ways of 'knowing' | Complex ways of 'knowing' | |
| ONTOLGIES | Single 'truths' | QI A nominal approach is assumed to a) the protocols of a research discipline (using quantified and/or qualified data) and b) the subjects studied | QII The subjects studied are accepted as complex but the tendency is to use, borrow or adapt the protocols of established research disciplines to understand complexity |
| | Complex 'truths' | QIV The differing views of the researchers, research protocols and research subjects are accepted as in QIII but the studies focus on synthesizing these into unified perspectives | QIII The multiple realities of the differing views of the researchers and research subjects are accepted and explored on many levels using established research protocols and newly devised methods to make sense of the complexities |

Figure 1: An ontological-epistemological framework for categorizing management research

QI

This might equate to what Kuhn (1962) terms normal science. Here dominant orthodoxies and their theories tend to define what exists and/or how this might be known. It requires very significant change to replace an existing orthodoxy, which it does with a new orthodoxy. Work psychology in the form criticised by Johnson and Cassell (2001) would be located within this quadrant. To reflect the concerns about the 'relevance' of management research raised by van Aken (2004) and others (e.g. Tranfield and Starkey, 1998), this quadrant is far more likely to produce knowledge that can be

transformed into a technological form and thus be deployed to assist practicing managers.

QII

There is no clear view about how 'truth' can be sensed and this precludes us from developing a consensus about what constitutes knowledge. The tendency, however, is to resort to adaptations of dominant orthodoxies and prevailing theories to explain complexity.

Q/III

Here there are as many realities as there are knowing subjects but there is no consensus about how the multiple 'truths' might be known. Some might argue that this is the domain of the postmodern. It has been severely criticized for its lack of rigour and its inability to produce knowledge that is useful to managers (Hardy and Clegg, 1999). Indeed, the production of knowledge that is useful to managers might seem to be antithetical to postmodern management researchers who often seem to equate management with command, control, oppression and exploitation. In this quadrant, reality is considered to be socially constructed.

Q/IV

Q/IV has provided us with the context and challenge for our research. While there are multiple realities, the aim is for a defined consensus about what constitutes knowledge and what constitutes an appropriate process for the production of valid and reliable knowledge. An example might help to provide an insight into some of the issues of adopting a Q/IV approach. A researcher seeking to explain recruitment and retention in an organisation could adopt a number of approaches. If the researcher uses an economics based framework, he/she might 'see' the problem in terms of the dynamics of labour market adjustment and collect data about wage differentials, the costs of job search and relocation, and the availability of labour market information. He/she could go on to develop an explanatory framework that looks at how employees or potential recruits seek to maximise their position in the labour market. A psychologist might frame the research using a completely different set of concepts such as commitment to explain retention. The data sets would be very different from that of the economist. The issues we are seeking to confront are how to develop richer understandings of phenomena using a synthesis of trans-disciplinary approaches rather than to assert or justify the use of one approach over another.

In this section of the paper, we have attempted to explain the framework for our research that sees multiple styles of enquiry as valid and useful. We argue that while methodological pluralism is a means

of developing a richer picture of our research field of managerial work, we are also aware of the problems of trans-disciplinarity in management research where subject-based and disciplinary hegemonies seek to assert their ascendancy thus defining the political context in which research is conducted. We also argue that in our study of managerial work, the background of the picture we develop will be just as important as the foreground and that we can only understand the foreground by understanding the background and the way that the foreground and the background contextualise each other. Essentially, given our focus on managerial work, the relationship between the research subject and their organisational context is critical and we need to design integrated approaches that will allow us to develop this three dimensional view.

4. The research stance of Researcher 1 (R1)

R1 has a background in general social science research having been educated in geography, economics and statistics. His background has been in applied research in both public policy and management with his doctoral research having focused on the design and development of large scale economic and labour market information systems for the practice of public policy. More recently he has applied his knowledge of economics and employment and his skill sets in data analysis to organisational analysis and to the analysis of the impact of organisational change on managers' experiences of their working and organisational lives.

His approach is essentially empirical, rational, realist, reductionist and objectivist. Most of his research has been undertaken using a hypothetico-deductive stance usually involving the design of questionnaires and surveys. His approach does not usually involve him having face-to-face contact with the research subject. Given the hypothetico-deductive approach, theory is held to exist prior to the study with the objective of the research normally being seen to test prior assumptions about the relationship between variables. In many cases, emphasis is placed more on 'finding an answer' than on developing the right question. Heavy reliance is usually placed

on prior literature to provide both conceptual and operation definitions.

Where new insights and understandings have been developed this has often been the result of data mining and the complex re-analysis or reclassification of data lending credence to the old maxims about multivariate analysis, which are that they are a means of finding an answer when you do not know what the question is and a means of taking data down to the woodshed to beat a confession out of it. While this approach has yielded many publications, it may have yielded some new insights but largely the publications are more empirical than theoretical and R1 has some sense of frustration that more theory has not developed. Despite the empirical nature of the research and the under-development of theory, the research has had impact on management practice as evidenced by its substantial publication in practitioner journals. This does, however, raise questions about practitioners' willingness to adopt research that is not grounded in theory. Essentially, much of the research published by R1 exists within QI of figure 1 though in common with many management researchers in the quest for greater Mode 2 relevance (Tranfield and Starkey, 1998) more of his research is now being conducted in QIV.

Recently R1 has become concerned about the limitations of QI research. He has become increasingly concerned about the problem of tautology in QI research. Given that prior theory tells the researcher what data to collect, how to collect it, how to analyse it, how to present the analysis and what hypotheses to test it is not surprising that much of the research is confirmatory. The publication of a recent paper in a psychology journal (Worrall et al., 2004) brought these issues to light. The journal will only publish papers presented in a format ordained by the American Psychological Association. While this framework does facilitate the cross-comparison of results and does require researchers to use research tools that have been 'proven' to provide valid and reliable measures of established concepts and constructs, it does, arguably, provide an orthodoxy that might militate against the publication of 'good quality' papers that are more innovative and ground-breaking. Here, what constitutes knowledge is

'policed' by journal editors and reviewers. Consequently, R1 has a real concern about innovation in research that has been frustrated by the cyclical and recursive nature of QI research. Innovation is more likely to arise if data from different types of research are juxtaposed and if the researcher comes into close contact with the subject of their research as they articulate their experiences in their own words and in their own ways. While reductionism has its place, there is a real problem that the process of reduction reduces the richness of the subject being researched as 'nuanced' discursive categories are reduced into rather bland items in a questionnaire.

While R1 is unlikely ever to discard his quantitative orientation completely, he feels it necessary to augment his repertoire of techniques by developing a style in which the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative approaches are used to support the development of richer interpretations and to move the emphasis more from an empirical orientation to an approach more geared to the development of new theory and new insights that are useful to the practice of management. While R1 feels competent at finding answers from data and providing guidance to practicing managers about 'what to do' on the basis of his analysis, he feels that approaches geared to the articulation of better questions might be more useful to managers in the long run than approaches that are oriented to the production of the clear but often flawed guidance that managers and the operational users of research often seek. Essentially, R1 has attempted to take what Weick (1999) has termed a 'reflexive turn' in his research and has increasingly called into question some of the issues that he considered either to be 'givens' or to be not worthy of consideration.

5. Discussion

This paper has attempted to expose some of the issues involved in conducting management research that need to be confronted whether the researcher is well established in his/her field or whether the researcher is just about to start a PhD. If the researcher wishes to make use of a purely instrumental approach to research, there is little doubt in my mind that they should confine their activity to QI of our

model and that they should conduct research in a domain where ontological realism and epistemological objectivism prevails. For, as Johnson and Duberley (2003) point out, the only reflexivity that the researcher will need to undertake here is oriented to technical issues about the selection of methods. However, as management researchers we should continually rethinking the way we think about management research and attempting to develop approaches to research that yield better insights and understandings to the issues that management researchers and the consumers of management research wish to address.

In many cases, practitioner-driven, 'high user-relevance' research will require management researchers to address research problems with the objective of producing a set of technological or functional rules that will bring about change or solve problems. In some highly bounded domains, this might be effective but in many arenas – particularly in information systems research, for example - the outcomes of research have led to management actions that have not had the desired results, have been mis-specified and inappropriate and have, in many cases, been completely counterproductive. This, we argue, is because problems and issues have not been properly articulated in the first place and because far too much has been taken for granted in the design of the research. Research design without adequate reflection about some of the underpinning facets of the research is a high risk strategy. There is ample evidence that much research conducted within QI of our model has been naïve and that many researchers within this domain, particularly in the field of work psychology as Johnson and Cassell would suggest, have simply persisted in ploughing an ever deepening furrow with ever more powerful statistical tools and techniques.

While we are aware that we have not raised or discussed many issues that are central to this debate – such as the issue of commensurability between research approaches located in different quadrants of our framework – we are convinced that it is important for management researchers to take less for granted and to become increasingly reflexive about some of the fundamental issues that they persist

in taking for granted. We hope that our research into the changing nature of managerial work will help to surface some of these issues and, as a result, help us to achieve our goal of painting a richer, more nuanced picture of managerial work than exists at present.

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