

RESEARCH IN MANAGEMENT: IS THERE A PRACTICE TURN?

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ABSTRACT:

After almost sixty years of complete domination on management research, the so-called Carnegie model is more and more challenged by alternative approaches mainly build on the concept of engaged scholarship, addressing the issues raised both by business and society. On the one hand, firms and organizations, more and more challenged by a fast-changing global world, need answers to their various concerns, and, on the other hand, governments and societies requires more and more data on the return on investments of academic research. Among the various concepts of action research, the need to address those issues and, at the same time, to create transferable knowledge, has led to the development by Andre Van de Ven of an approach based on a concept created by Andrew Pettigrew (Pettigrew, 2001, 2014; Van de Ven, 2002,2006). There is a French method, called Socio-Economic Approach to Management (SEAM), developed since 1973, that is on the same epistemology that Engaged Scholarship, and is interesting enough to be regarded as an alternative to the mainstream research on subjects like Organizational Development and Change or company overall performance. On top of that, only a few people know that this method is implemented by several American business schools today.

Key-words: Management research, Socio-economic approach to Management, Engaged scholarship, Qualimetrics.

1. THE LIMITS OF THE MAINSTREAM RESEARCH MODEL

The current mainstream research in management, established after the implementation of the so-called “Carnegie Model” (Gleeson & Schlossman, 1995), by American business schools in the 1960s (Mintzberg, 2004, p.25), is still dominant. But, it looks more and more like a rigid and intolerant church, with its Canon Law, its *Imprimatur*'s system and its careers' control through rankings (Adler & Harzing, 2009, pp.72-85).

Since that time, this new paradigm has been implemented by all business schools around the world (Guyot, 2012, pp. 53-55). If that research claims to be ‘a kind of physics’, furthermore, over the years, it has turned ‘scientific, following economics’ (Guyot, 2016, p. 3). Murray (1988, pp. 71-78) explained that move “by the desire... of graduate business schools’ academics to improve their status vis-à-vis academics in the other parts of the university”. Indeed, many academics were considering management science as a lower tier subject, ‘down under’,

more aware of making money than pure science (Guyot, 2014, p. 181). then, in the 1960s, business schools took on the “traditions and ways of mainstream academia (Crainer & Dearlove, 1999, p. 40)”. They enthusiastically seized on or applied a scientific paradigm of precision, control and testable models (Bailey & Ford, 1996, p. 8). The key-words of this paradigm were rigor and relevance, but, over the years, it has moved more and more toward rigor. Ideally, it would have required to create a specific epistemology for management science to answer the critic of Hayek (1989, p. 3) “the ‘scientistic’ attitude “is decidedly unscientific in the true sense of the word, since it involves a mechanical and uncritical application of habits of thought to fields different from those in which they have been formed.”

Today, we can only note that there is no epistemology specific to this discipline, but only a reference to a hypothetical-deductive approach. In fact, an observation of those publications over the recent years shows rather a scattering upon a large variety of theories like relativism, feminism, postmodern, critical, and the like. Regularly, criticisms emphasize the use of classrooms as a sample to create fake data, or the use of statistical methods taken from the shelf, without any justification of the choice. This is just a facet of a much larger concern of social sciences which are in “deep trouble” (Van de Ven, 2016). He explains that, “while highly productive, there are big concerns that this scholarly output is ‘contestable, unreliable, unusable, narrow, careerist’”. On top of that, this research is the voice of editors and reviewers, and not of the authors themselves.

- Contestable, because harking back and throwing out outliers;
- Unreliable, because only few replications and low construct validity;
- Unusable, because not grounded and irrelevant;
- Narrow, because grounded on “theory fetishness” and similarity;
- Careerist, because instrumental and self-serving;
- Editors’ voice, because authors must comply with the editorial line of A journals to be published; In fact, the editorial line is defined by the editorial committee, and, since there is only a small percentage of articles - among a large yield - that are published, the leading themes are defined by a very small number of not academic editors.

Addressing another issue, Van de Ven considers the problem of replication, which is a cornerstone of physics’ experiments. In the biggest project of its kind, the social-psychologist Brian Nosek, head of the Center for Open Science, and 269 co-authors repeated work reported in 98 original papers from three psychology journals, if they independently come up with the same results. Only 39% of the replication attempts were successful! But whether a replication is successful is not straightforward. Then how to address this dilemma?

- For scholars, data manipulation, fabrication, hoarding, harking, that may benefit individual self-interests are bad for the field as a whole.
- For journals, editors/reviewers desire to protect journal’s status (citations, impact factor) by not unilaterally adopting practices that benefit the field as a whole.

Byington & Felps (2016) propose:

- “Don’t hate the player, hate the game”;
- Develop collective action among peer journals.

Then, in order to improve the game, it is necessary to incentivize credible research far from the field and decrease the value of noncredible self-interests:

- Publish replication studies;
- Publish null results;
- Enable robustness checks data access;
- Adopt open credibility-boosting Increase practices;
- Increase communications among journals.

The socio-institutional theory has been invoked to understand those issues, through the concept of institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). They currently explain that, in a given organizational field, institutions tend to change their structures by an “institutional isomorphic change” through three different drivers:

- *Normative isomorphism*, which is frequently associated with professionalization and formal education systems (DiMaggio & Powell, Id);
- *Mimetic isomorphism*, which finds its origin in uncertainty and, “in such circumstances organizations may choose to copy innovations or practices undertaken by other organizations in their sector so as to enhance or not to risk to lose their legitimacy” (Cooper, Parkes & Blewitt, 2014). Which is clearly the case in management science;
- *Coercive isomorphism*, which is about pressures on organizations to motivate them to change to comply with a strong constituent in order to remain legitimate (Tuttle & Dillard, 2007).

Today, the balance between rigor and relevance seems to step back towards center (Brown, 2011), following the repeated claims of Scopinker in the *Financial Times*: “Why business ignores business schools” (2008) and “Why business still ignores business schools” (2011). Rynes & Brown (2011) writes: “at the same time that much of top-tier management research has continued to get increasingly esoteric, there are other trends in the opposite direction. For example, qualitative field research is back progressively with new sources of funding and new forum for discussing it” (Brown, Id). Bartunek & Rynes (2010) found that we pay more attention to implications for practice. Of course, it doesn’t mean that it’s enough, and a swallow doesn’t make a summer, but there has been a twist in a constantly evolving situation (Bonnet, 2015). Grounded research’s articles are more and more accepted by well ranked journals. But Cummins (2011) introduced a broader view of relevance with the concept of usefulness. For him, a useful research address four themes: (1) rigorous and relevant, (2) collaboratively designed, (3) focused on messy problems grounded in practice, and (4) long-term and intense.

2. MANAGERIAL IMPACTS OF RESEARCH

A recent survey of the French National Foundation for Business Management (*FNEGE/Fondation Nationale pour la Gestion des Entreprises*, www.fnege.org/barometre) has clearly analyzed this question. Under the title: “Strong Signals: the expectations of Companies in regard to research in

Management” this study, made on a panel of 240 companies, give a thorough understanding of the needs of businesses.

In his introduction, the coordinator of the “barometer” (Lamarque, Id) addresses the question of the adaptation of the research in management to fit the needs of businesses. Not only he emphasizes the fact that the national committee on assessment of research and higher education (*HCERES/Haut Comité sur l’Evaluation de la Recherche et l’Enseignement Supérieur*) has included in its six criteria the social economic impact, but also, it has defined *valorisation*’s practices as research’s products (*Valorisation*: to make usable or marketable results, knowledges or skills of research).

He observes that more and more reports on the impact that business schools should have on innovation, competitiveness or growth are published in France and abroad; the White Book of *FNEGE in 2015*, the 2014 congress of the British Academy of Management, the 2016 theme of the General Estates of management.

A study of websites of the international accreditation agencies (AACSB, EFMD...) shows that they have moved their criteria in the same direction. In UK, for every research project completed, the researcher is required to make explicit the outputs for the society. But, in the research in management, a majority of people accepts only the peers’ validation. Of course, the idea is not to swing the pendulum to the practical, but “to find a new epistemological approach which should join the old one” (Guyot, 2016, p. 2).

Then, it’s time to decide what could be an adequate model for this new research in management focused on solving real problems, an Action Research.

3. WHAT KIND OF ACTION RESEARCH WOULD BE THE BEST?

Today, practitioners are confronted to new problems in a more and more complex and competitive business world. We know that they are needing more help from academic research on issues that are presented in the FNEGE’s barometer (Ibid pp. 3-5). Here are the first five ones:

1. Customer Relation Management (score: 4.12/5);
2. Innovation: Organization, Effectiveness (score: 4.00/5);
3. Mobilization, Commitment, Support of H. R. and Management (score: 3.93/5);
4. Comprehensive Performance of the Firm (not Financial) (score: 3.90/5);
5. How to create Collective Efficiency and Operational Reactivity (score: 3.90/5).

For Management Research centers, this barometer should become a reference’s and benchmark’s tool, concerning the themes studied by these researchers. It’s a mean to assess the coherence between the scientific yield and the expectations of firms.

Today, researchers in management science are aware of this issue and try to think more about the complementarity between theoretical and practical rationalities. It’s also an issue for doctoral students with the strong development

of DBA, which are necessarily using an action research approach. In the near future, it would certainly influence the research's conception of new professors, since more and more will have received a DBA instead of a PhD.

Definitions: There are a lot of definitions of action research (Boje, 2003), like Action learning, Action science, Clinical research, Action enquiry, Participative observation, Appreciative inquiry, Intervention-research, Process consultation... In fact, it's a very diverse world, belonging to all social sciences, and, for a long period of time, it has been a good reason, for the academic community in management science, to refuse to recognize it. The most recent definition (Coghlan & Brydon Miller, 2014, p. xxxv) explains: Many traditions have created their own version of action-research. All of them agree upon the idea that it describes a group of related approaches "integrating theory and action with the goal of addressing organizational community and social issues together with those who experience them." Action research focuses on the creation of areas of collaborative learning and design, enactment and evaluation of liberating actions through combining action and reflection. It's an ongoing cycle of co-generative knowledge, in which the researcher doesn't stand alone in its ivory's tower, since he doesn't have the monopoly of situations and action's understanding: the researcher in Action science plays a key role by accompanying actors, formalizing, using reflexivity, conceptualization, and writing, and he develops a "distant familiarity" with the research's ground (Girin, 1990).

Scientific base: Action research fits the needs of researchers who try to observe the complex objects called management's situations, and practitioners, who try to detach themselves and create knowledge for action and by action (Dewey, 1938; Gibbons, 1994), in collaborating with academics. It's even more vital, today, to address the complexity and hyper-competition faced by firms in the global world (D'Aveni & Al.). It is unavoidable in the study of organizations, but very useful in many more subjects where the role of actors is decisive. Rejecting the Weberian prohibition of actors, Kurt Lewin (1948-1951) has introduced real people in the research process and introduced the researcher as an actor among others, with its stakes and subjectivity, the perfect objectivity being unreachable. Hence, the goal is to improve the observations' quality through intersubjectivity (Habermas, 1984). Rejecting Plato's separation of the universal from the sensitivity to move back to Socrates' philosophy, this approach leads to Aristotle's concept of "praxis" ((Eikeland, 2008).

Action Research differs from mainstream research that uses only questionnaires to validate hypothesis. But, it is well documented that any kind of observation in social science (including questionnaires) influences actors' behavior. From Hawthorne effect (Mayo, 1945) to Pygmalion effect (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968) and even, in Medicine, placebo effect (Haygarth, 1800). The treatment of data, even quantitative ones, may be influenced, even in Physics, where it is well documented that a significant number of experiments are impossible to replicate and then considered as wrong, without finding mistakes in the original protocol. As far as management research is concerned, it doesn't seem that replication is a current practice. Ethno-statisticians have shown that collecting, treating and interpreting quantitative data may be biased (Gephart, 1986, 2009). Van de Ven (2007, p. 14) has shown that answers to questionnaires depend upon the context, the time when the question is asked, the formulation of the question, the quality

of sharing the language between the author of the questionnaire and the respondent...

Action research is incorporated in the framework of the scholar practitioner approach developed by Van de Ven under the name of Engaged Scholarship (2000, 2007). In the field of epistemology, it's part of critical realism (Bhaskar, 1989) that reconcile constructivism positivism and pragmatism: reality exists but it's so complex that it requires a kind of collective intelligence and intersubjectivity (Habermas, 1984). Then, it comes up to action sciences like medicine and engineering in which knowledge is built through action (Hatchuel & David, 2008; Savall & Fièrè, 2014). Research action in management science needs to have a better codification due to the large number of criticisms it receives. First, a research action requires more than few interviews and a qualitative data analysis, intersubjectivity and reflexivity are necessary. Second, the usual criticism of the mainstream researchers is to judge action research as not scientific. It has been shown above that their own works are not free from critics, but they are the mainstream, and they have nothing to prove. Then, action research has to compare their findings to those of the mainstream, and to clearly make explicit what is generalizable in their findings and what is not.

There are three forms of Action research (Walsh, 2011):

- First person action research: attending to one's own thinking, valuing, way of learning and behaving. The researcher must pay more attention to its intents, strategies, behavior, and the impact of his action on himself and on his positioning. There is a need for scientific doubt. It's important to make the effort of observing without concluding, in order to escape hasty conclusions, to move on to alternative interpretations and to avoid the trap of reassuring solutions (Argyris, 2000) by operating a continuous back and forth between action and reflection. The researcher must also slow down the decision process, and his first quality is not to talk, but to listen!
- Second person action research: Face to face working with individual or teams and groups. The goal is to set up a long-range dialogue, which will improve the quality of dialogue between participants (Torbert, 1973). It's a continuous process of reformulation, conversation, reasoning, and questioning which allow a mutual enrichment. This teamwork, like Action Learning (Revans, 1982), is necessary for the functioning of those groups.
- Third person action research: Extending first and second person to an impersonal audience who were not directly involved in the project. It aim at boosting the universal character of the first and second level's results to a theoretical content. Then, following Checkland (Checkland & Al., 1998), there are five means to favor the transferable part of the assets of research action:

- Publication and diffusion of research's results through courses or conferences,
- Replication of experiments until the acceptance of the research's invariant,
- Realization of action research on a large scale,
- Spread of results to a large number of executives and managers who want to replicate the experiment in their own context,
- Spread of results through networks.

This last mean is very important, because one of the main weaknesses of the research in management is its *entre-soi* (between us). On top of that, researchers in management science doesn't even read each other's publications since the average number of citations of an article is 0.82 (Starbuck, 2005). Science can only make progress because of controversy. And, today, it must work at the global level and involve all stakeholders, which means all the interested academics and practitioners. "Neither scientists, nor practitioners simply apply scientific research, they collaborate in discussions and engage in practices that actively interpret its value to accomplish their tasks." (Guyot, 2016, p. 10).

Diversity of action research's methods: Among the typologies of collaborative researches between researchers and firms, the one proposed by Edgar Schein (2001, p.229) took apart the project initiated by the researcher from the case initiated by the firm. He cross-references these facts with the criteria of strong or weak involvement of the researcher and/or the firm. He finds that surveys, internships, ethnography, expert assessments are characterized by a low level of involvement of the firm's actors. But, clinical research (the project originated from the company) or action research (the study originated from the researcher) require a strong time, the clinical researcher will provide his expertise. This approach, in which the actors must find in themselves resources to heal. It is somewhat similar to Argyris's concept of organizational learning and development (Argyris & Shön, 1978): involvement from both the researcher and the company. For Schein (Ibid, p. 235) action research allows to access data that are accessible neither by surveys nor questionnaires. In fact, the quality of data increases when actors find the utility of these data in their work. Then, He concludes that moving toward action research will increase the quality of a 'participant observation' or an ethnographic work.

In management science, 'participant observation' groups a number of methods that associates the organizations' actors to collecting data (Riveline, 1984; Malinowski, 1989; Plane, 2000). These various methods of participant observation belong to first person action research and lean on ethnography (Caulknis, 1995) to highlight a holistic way the multiplicity of realities perceived by the organizations' actors. Various techniques are used: silent observations, emphatic listening, narrative methods (Boje, 2001), storytelling (Lyotard, 1984)... All of them require rigor in the process of collecting and analyzing materials and perceptions. The reflexivity and reciprocity vis-à-vis company's actors is a major issue, in order to improve validity and precision of collected

data by using intersubjectivity. This reciprocity goes through a restitution of results to involved actors but also through its own interpretation.

The clinical research may be approached through the Edgar Schein's model (Schein, 1969, 1987). Based on first and second person action research, it is called "process consultation." The findings of the Academy of Management's Management Consulting (Argyris, 2000; Buono, 2009) show that the traditional purchases of consultancy and ready-made solutions is a kind of mimetism that block the true organizational learning process: Lean Management, Balanced Score-card, Business Process, Re-engineering, ERP setting up, have been implemented, at the mercy of the current fashion, without paying any attention to their impacts. Schein has shown that the not-scientific character of those methods lies in the lack of analysis of the reasons of the problems faced by the firm.

The clinical research, as recommended by Schein, (Schein, 2001), the consultant ask questions, sometimes remain silent, to lead the director and the actors to explicit hidden data, and to structure thought in order to build by themselves the innovative solutions, Then, in a second

- Simple loop learning: Strategies of action are changed, but the rest of the theories remains constant.
- Double loop learning: It involve change in goals, frames, values, and standards in performance.

The collective reflexivity makes possible the challenge of implicit action's models and innovation, instead of copying existing methods or settle for basic actions of continuing progress, like in quality monitoring.

4. THE QUALIMETRIC INTERVENTION-RESEARCH.

The qualimetric system proposed by the socio-economic approach to management (SEAM, Savall & Zardet, 2004) has been created in 1974 and developed since that time by ISEOR, a research team that is currently part of the "Magellan" research center, IAE Lyon Business School, University Jean Moulin Lyon 3 (France). It's a well-known example of "engaged scholarship" and represents a hybrid of constructionist and positivist epistemologies. As such, it may fit the professional science requirements laid down by Van de Ven (Beer & Norhia, 2000). Again, we leave the realm of simple sciences where basic laws apply to enter a domain where complexity rules (March & Simon, 1958), and which is haughtily ignored by quantitative research. The starting point was the assessment made by Henri Savall that action research didn't take into account the economic dimension and that it was detrimental for the development of that kind of research and practice. Moreover, the traditional accounting and management control system were unable to measure the phenomena to observe, like hidden costs and performances that could be as important as the wage costs (Savall, 1975). The qualimetric research method recognizes that organizations are complex objects, always on the move, that can be understood a better way through a mix of qualitative, quantitative and financial data.

Then, the ISEOR Lab has been created to experiment this new research method and develop it. Its founding pillars are cognitive interactivity, contradictory intersubjectivity, and generic contingency (Savall & Zardet, 2011).

- Cognitive interactivity means that there is a continuous interaction between the researcher and the actors of the organization, which allow a production of data that neither the one nor the others could provide separately. For example, hidden costs linked to the lack of recognition of the actors' contributions cannot be worked out without the help of actors. Those evaluations show that hidden costs range from 30 % to 70 % of the value added, half of those amounts being confirmed opportunity costs and half over expenses (i.e. between 30,000 € and 70,000 € per person and per year in European countries; Savall, 2017).
- Contradictory intersubjectivity is based on the idea that it is possible to build management's models that are preferred by all the involved actors. In fact, even in sciences or, at least, in a large part of them, there is no "objective" intersubjectivity, but only a language's one which has never been formalized enough to be mathematically recognized (Thom, 1990, p. 620).
- Generic contingency: The research-intervention process creates two kinds of knowledges, an apprenticeship for the organization's actors that is specific and contingent to it, and a generic knowledge, applicable to any organization. Then, generic contingency creates a model defined by the list of its elements (Torbert, 2004). In the case of SEAM, "this evidence, as supported by ISEOR's extensive database-which draws on over 1350 companies and organizations from 72 sectors and 39 countries on four continents, collected over the past 40 years-captures the reality that the potential individuals bring to their organizations is vastly underutilized and underdeveloped." (Buono, 2015).

A recent article (Savall & Fièrè, 2014) has clearly demonstrated, through an experimentation of the SEAM method (intervention based research) to a hospital, that the example of medical sciences is probably the most fruitful for management, since it takes account of researches on a given problem, either particular (pharmacological or clinical trial) or generic (epidemiological trial). The characteristic of intervention-research is to couple and alternate the research in companies (*in vivo*) and the work in ISEOR Lab (*in vitro*). Starting from an iterative formulation of progressive hypothesis, the intervener-researcher provides an outcome useful for the company and a conceptualization of scientific intent. Research-intervention can be regarded both as a fundamental research, based on rigor-relevance criteria, and an action research, leading to relevant and immediate applications (2014, p. 356 *et sq.*). Then, this research is located in Pasteur's quadrant (Stokes, 1997). It's an evidence-based type of research, deriving from the original concept of evidence-based medicine. It implies a strict process of translation of practical problems into questioning, analysis, research and incorporation in the decision process of possible evidences, before evaluating the effects of the taken decision. The socio-economic theory states that, in order to improve the sustainable performances of an organization, it's efficient to start from malfunctions in order to define, jointly with the organization's actors, a better functioning, factor of better performances, following a full scientific process like medical research.

There is a strong methodological convergence between the SEAM approach and the medical research based on the following: observing the complex object with a rigorous research protocol, no distinction between theoretical and applied research, but a continuum, team research including stakeholders, and principles of cognitive interactivity, contradictory inter-subjectivity and cognitive contingency. In fact, the main differences are external to research, even though they influence its results. For example, the human body is naturally built-in, but not organizations; Medicine has a universal recognition, but management science has a weak credibility; describing is a major result in clinical research but it's out of the scope of the mainstream research in management; In medicine, there is a differentiation between etiology and parthenogenesis but engaged scholarship has still to improve its methodology to adopt this process; The set of methodological protocols in medicine is controlled par laws, norms, professional orders, but it's not the case of engaged scholarship, right now, which is still lacking a methodological consensus.

5. CONCLUSION

There is another issue that is similar in management and in medicine, the value added of a given research to the society. Today, there are more and more claims for a requirement of social interest in any research, at least a statement of this value added ex-post, if not possible ex-ante. But, in management science, this need can be understood as something similar to the demand of public health in medicine, except that the goal is the public health of companies or organizations. It's clearly documented that "engaged scholarship" is focused on the concept of Professional research for a professional school (Van de Ven, 2000, p. 394), with a faculty shared in two segments, of which one become part of the managerial culture and "the other segment, often trained... in a basic discipline, gets absorbed in the culture of that discipline and largely dependent of it for goals, values or approval" (Guyot, 2015, p. 10). A business school has a social obligation to find ways to heal the sick organizations and to find vaccines and medications, doctors and treatments to fight the viruses that infect many companies and organizations. And, ultimately, by caring those organizations, reduce the suffering of their employees and the plague of unemployment. Then, where business schools put the pendulum between the two segments of research is a strategic matter which will influence the destiny of a large number of people, and of the whole society as well.

Since 1973 (roughly half a century), the SEAM method has tried to take place in the research in management's story. A real innovation always creates a consensus, against itself! But, as early as the 1980s, Ph. D. graduates from ISEOR has been qualified by the National Committee, and, then, recruited by universities all around France. In each subject (e.g. Management) the 'CNU' National Committee is made up of sixteen professors and sixteen associate professors, elected by their colleagues every four years, which decides, on research criteria, if somebody can become associate or full professor. To date, ISEOR, it's 147 Ph.D. awarded, and 40 associate and full professors recruited. But, it's also a large international network developed mainly in the Americas,

with graduate and doctoral programs using the SEAM method for intervention and research everywhere in Latin America, and, through strong partnerships, in USA (New Mexico State University, University of St Thomas, College of St Scholastica), in Mexico (eight universities). At last, ISEOR cooperates with the Academy of Management since 2001, and ten divisions have organized in Lyon (in France, where is based ISEOR) their international conference.

Research in management is not pure scholarship, hence, because it's developed in business schools, that have also a social goal, to improve the functioning of firms and organizations. Unlike most of university's departments, business schools, with other professional schools like schools of engineering, law schools or schools of medicine, must build a bridge between the academic world and the actors of the society (Guyot, 2012, pp. 223-225). Then, business schools must address the new issues faced by firms and organizations, in order to find transferable answers to their specific questions. The ISEOR research center sets an example of a desirable future of management research. It can be compared to a university hospital, where patients are treated and healed from painful organizational diseases. Treatment are developed according to rigorous protocols that draw on scientific observation, as opposed to ill-designed distance observation usually practiced in mainstream management research.

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