WHAT IS MANAGEMENT RESEARCH FOR? WHAT CAN IT DO? WHAT SHOULD IT DO?

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Abstract

Management research as a particular variety of social scientific research always faces continuous and fierce challenge and criticism. What is management research for? What can it do? What should it do? These three ontological and epistemological questions have always been considered as the core and fundamental argument in the field of management study. Through systematically discussing and analysing the various ontological and epistemological positions which formed the base of contemporary management research, this paper is to reflect that no matter what ontological and epistemological perspectives the research stands for, they are just the version of controversies and only represent the point of view of one school or several groups of academics but not final, determinative and absolute truth. Any truth is continually developed and revised. Management research as the centre of social research should hold an open and flexible tenet to accept and encourage the development of various ideas rather than merely blindly worship a dominant doctrine.

Keywords: management research, ontological and epistemological controversies, the subjective-objective continuum

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Introduction

Management research as a particular variety of social scientific research always faces continuous and fierce challenge and criticism. What is management research for? What can it do? What should it do? These three ontological and epistemological questions have always been considered as the core and fundamental argument in the field of management study. This paper is going to present a comprehensive understanding and discussion of philosophical and sociological foundations of management research, reflect where the management research comes from and where does it go and lay out the foundation for further management study.

What is management research for?

There seems to be many different understandings of ontological and epistemological stances which talk about what management research is. One perspective considers that management research is scientific study of real, objective social phenomenon. Others believe that management research is empirical action of that human interpret the world via the use of their experience and common-sense knowledge. But most of scholars argue that the nature of management research in the ontological and epistemological controversies is always embedded in a subjective-objective continuum, and is never separated into a dualistic position of pure objectivism and pure subjectivism.

The objectivist perspective emphasises that management research is scientific study of the truth which is defined as "the accurate representation of an independently existing reality" (Smith & Hodkinson, 2005: 916). As Guba & Lincoln (2005: 203) state, "there is a real reality out there, apart from the flawed human apprehension of it. And that reality can be approached only through the utilization of methods that prevent human contamination of its apprehension or comprehension". According to this understanding, management research is regarded as the scientific study of the social world which exists externally and independently, just as the study of natural world. And the true reality in the management research should not be influenced by human involvement and its property can only be measured through objective scientific methods such as experiment. Moreover, the objectivist perspective also emphasises that the accumulation of knowledge is a process of accumulation of accurate representations of what is outside of its carrier. This view represents an epistemological stance – *positivism* – which insists that knowledge is a prior, external truth, and cannot be inferred via subjective sensation or intuition. Knowledge is only meaningful and significant when it is based on factual observation and experiment. Any knowledge which comes from sensory experience is not objective reality. As Comte (1853) claims, there is no real knowledge except those based on observed facts.

On the other hand, subjectivist perspective argues that "the assumptions guiding positivism derive from the study of largely inanimate or biological phenomena that lacks the capacity

for self-reflection and cultural production" (Prasad, 2005: 5). By contrast the social sciences, especially management research, are inevitably concerned with social, economic and cultural worlds that are constituted by the human capacity for meaningful understanding and action. That is, the object of social science research – *human* – is different from the object of natural science research such as atom and electrons. Human plays the vital role on the stage of their life. They make sense of the world around them in a particular way which reflects their subjective thinking and knowledge background. Researchers should not generalize one single person's value or attitude to everyone in their social class just as generalize certain natural laws (e.g. Bryman & Bell, 2007; Easter-by-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2008; Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2007).

Human creates mutual agreements and understandings to help themselves to interpret the world around them rather than just respond to it.

As Smith (1998: 161) says, "if we believe something to be real, it is real enough in its consequences for we behave as if it does exist". For example, a bank note is nothing more than a printed paper. All knowledge of a note we probably know is its material nature such as weight, shape and so forth, namely its physical knowledge in terms of the objectivist perspective. However, if we turn a note into money, the social meaning of the money would be embedded in the meaning of the piece of paper. Through using the piece of paper as a common measurement of value for comparing different things, people make money to be money. There is no any material property or external reality of a piece of paper can make money to be money but a social agreement. In other words, there is money, because we agree it as money, otherwise, it is just a piece of paper. Therefore, as Lynch (2000) expresses, consensual beliefs and concerted practices give rise to the objectivity of social facts. This objectivity is real, in the sense that it is inter-subjective, exists independently of the observer, and persists in time, but its reality depends upon, and is continually sustained by, reflexive subscription to that very reality.

However, apart from the hard and prior facts or interpretations and constructions of self-consciousness about the world, many scholars argue that ontological and epistemological controversies in the area of management research have never ever fallen into a dualistic position, but they have been always in a subjective-objective continuum.

On the one side of the continuum, the social world the management research engages in is seen as "a hard, concrete, real thing out there" (Morgan & Smircich, 1980: 495). It is objective and external entity which is detached from human's descriptions (Bryman & Bell, 2007). Human being in accordance to this point of view is seen as a mechanical responder who always reacts to situations in a lawful way in spite of their perception may affect this process of reaction in some degree (Morgan & Smircich, 1980). Knowledge is regarded as external reality

which is only gained through collection of the facts that can produce the objective and law-like doctrines. In other words, the social world is like a machine with full of objective laws. The humankind is like a small cog in the big machine, and follows the rules and regulations to thinking and behaving.

At the other end of the continuum, the highly subjectivist position views the management research as exploring behaviour of the social reality which is regarded as "a projection of human imagination" (Morgan & Smircich, 1980: 494). This view strongly conveys a transcendental phenomenological sense of that there is never an external or internal facts out there, but it is all about a reality in consciousness. Instead of bothering with factual realities, the transcendental phenomenology pays more attention on viewing the world as the pure meaning. As Thevenaz (1962) describes, transcendental phenomenology leaves the independent reality of all kind aside and only pursue the pure and simple subjectivist and intentions of consciousness. Nevertheless, this extreme idea is so close to a position of solipsism which emphasizes abandoning the external everyday world and only searching for the transcendental consciousness (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). This kind of idea is seen as very dangerous for management research and even for all social research.

Next, let us looks back to the objectivist side. The mechanical notion of the world as a closed system has been challenged by its inflexibility. In the epistemological stance, the reality of the world is an organism or an open system rather than closed one, and human is regarded as adaptors instead of responders (Morgan & Smircich, 1980).

To elaborate, the early social philosophers used to apply the ideas and methods of natural science to study social science. This tradition has strongly impact on the development of modern social research, especially in the management area. One of the famous sociologists, Auguste Comte (1853), believes that the society is in a process of evolutionary transition. This process is just like a biological system or organism where everything interacts with everything else. It is extremely difficult to find determinate causal relationship between constituent factors.

Subsequently, Herbert Spender, one of Comte's followers, further developed Comte's idea and proposes that society should be seen as a "super-organism" or "ecological aggregate" rather than an organism (Buckley, 1967: 12-13). It is because the organism is more emphasis on the unity and cooperation of its internal parts but not externally fighting with environment for survival. On the contrary, the ecological aggregate is more concentration on the competition for survival, which is more applicable for the Darwinian model of competitive struggle (Buckley, 1967). That is, in order to survive, the organisation in the society as organisms needs to continually change and adjust itself to meet the demand of environment.

At the other end, the ontological and epistemological stance focuses on the reality as social construction and human is to actually

create their realities rather than merely as transcendental beings. The social constructivism as an anti-foundational stance argues that what is regarded as the universal truth and the valid knowledge stems from the negotiation between participative communities concerning what is accepted collectively as truth (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). And this consensual truth is never fixed and unchangeable, but it is temporal and will change in terms of time and space (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). In other words, there is no final definitive reality or truth out there according to the social constructionist perspective. People interpret the social world around them via sharing experience and concerted practices with each others. The reality we believe is constructed socially and given meaning by ourselves. We revise these versions of social reality over time and we construct the accounts of the social world again and again to make our world intelligible to us. And the meaning of the reality or the truth given by our collective beliefs is not a constant notion. On the contrary, it is a highly ephemeral and will be revised or reconstructed.

In the end, the ontological and epistemological perspective go forward again in the objectivist side and emphasises that the evolution between the organismic system and its environment is a two-way street rather than one adapts to another (Morgan & Smircich, 1980). The assumption that only system adapts to its environment is seen as inadequate for studying the world as a process of information (Morgan & Smircich, 1980). That is, the change

in the environment causes the change of the system to cope with new conditions and demands. At the same time, the environment also slightly and gradually changes to meet the demands of the system. Just as Bateson (1972: 155) describes the "systemic wisdom", he points out that not only the evolution of horse depends on adaptation to the grassy plains but also the grassy plains have also evolved along with the horse.

On the other side, the subjectivist perspective is also being pushed forward and characterizes the social world the management research study as a domain of symbolic discourses (Morgan & Smircich, 1980). This conception points out that the social world cannot be represented in terms of deterministic relationships (Morgan & Smircich, 1980), instead, "we are in a continual process of interpreting the social world around us in that we interpret the actions of others with whom we interact and this interpretation leads to adjustment of our own meanings and actions" (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2007: 107). To elaborate, individuals create their social world through interacting with their environment instead of only reacting to it. This interaction is a unique process of being a human because it depends on the common definition and interpretation of language and gestures that enable people to understand from one another (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). Therefore, if we want to study the social world and understand the explanation of social affairs, we should look at how the way of social order is formed rather than assuming

any pre-understanding of what the social affairs are and then test it with an objective approach.

What it can do?

Comparing with the question regarding what management research is for, this one is even more difficult to give a simple answer. It is because there seems to be many answers from different angles for this question. For instance, management research can seek to generate new theories and critical ideas. It can test the validity and reliability of existing theories and frameworks. It can explore and discover the untouched territories of knowledge, and it also can offer statistical findings for decision-making of new policy and so on. However, after considering the ontological and epistemo-logical stances, it seems to offer us some clues for this question. Instead of looking at what management research can produce, it should perhaps pay extra attention on how the management research does. Some scholars consider that this is the essence to answer the question of what management research can do. In other words, does management research produce objective, law-like findings or it makes sense of world via the use of experience and common-sense knowledge or both?

Firstly, if people accept the reality as the real, hard and prior facts, what the management research can do is to produce objective and law-like findings through scientific studying the objective reality. For instance, testing validity and reliability of existing theories or framework and counting general information feedback for

decision-making of new policy would be seen as the good examples of this idea. On the contrary, if people believe that the reality is constructed and interpreted by ourselves rather than a prior truth, what the management research can do is to gain a rich and insightful understanding of the research subject through using methods relevant to the production of common-sense knowledge in different areas of everyday life. For example, developing new theories and exploring untouched knowledge field would be regarded as the instances from this perspective.

Secondly, there have been always debates about the adequacy of research methods in the social science in the methodological level. The highlight issue of these debates is located in the dominant quantitative hypothesis-testing methods which inherit from natural sciences have been continually criticized and questioned whether they are good enough as a foundation for social research (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000). Especially, in recent several decades, the rapid development of economy and technology are changing the way we live and the way we think. More and more people argue that social science is different from natural science, and study of social science need a different logic of research procedure, which can mirror the distinction between humans and natural elements (e.g. Smith, 1998; Bryman & Bell, 2007). Therefore, a call was raised in favour of qualitative methods for study of social world. As Morgan & Smircich (1980) describe, organisational and managerial research during 1960s and 1970s passionately

fancied about the use of quantitative methods, after 1990s, it is more interested in the employment of qualitative methods in the management research.

However, they also insist that it is very danger, if one dominant type of abstracted empiricism is taken over by another one. Therefore, what management research can do at this level is really contested. Perhaps what it can do is to critically analyse the strength and limitation of both quantitative and qualitative research methods, and encourage choosing the appropriate research methods to match the right research purposes and philosophical positions rather than blindly pursuing the so-called external truth.

Moreover, the management research can also do further exploration on filling the gap between quantitative objectivism and qualitative subjectivism. Perhaps the mixed method is one way worth to try, even though some scholars may not agree with me in terms of the argument that there is no a real integrative mixed method in the contemporary research of social science, and all methods have been called as 'mixed' are just simple quantitative method plus qualitative method (Bryman & Bell, 2007; Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

Finally, at the application aspect, as Gummesson (2000: 1-2) states, "most business schools are preoccupied with the mechanics of statistical techniques, believing that these techniques in themselves offer a highway to the advancement of knowledge and science." However, these people who support to generate scientific and authoritative knowledge to interpret actions of human being seems to forget that researchers are not the god, writing as disembodied omniscient narrators claiming universal, a temporal general knowledge. Researchers can eschew the questionable narrative of scientific objectivity and still have plenty to say as situated speakers, subjectivities engaged in knowing/telling about the world as they perceive it (Richardson, 1998).

What should it do?

As Grey & Willmott (2002) suggest that management research is regarded as a central power to wrestle with the issues of social and environmental reasonability, political administration and equity. Especially, today, economic, technological and social environment have altered considerably. The rapid spread of networks between educations, businesses and political movements has no respect for any national and geographical boundaries. The evolution of Information Technology in communication has marked its achievement and impact on various fields and forces us to rethink the relationship between technology, language and social relations. The global warming, territorial pollution and acid rain have started to warn us the relationship between social and physical environments are not that far as we imagine. All of these issues are sending a clear signal: whether social scientists need to reassess their role today and reconsider what management research should do under this dynamic and changeful environment.

Certainly, there are a lot of things we can imagine for this question. And also obviously, different people who have different backgrounds and positions may hold different ideas and pay attention on different issues. Thus, it is believed that there is no one best answer for the question. Different debates and arguments are acceptable and they are also very important and significant for making our world better. One of the biggest challenges that academics or even practitioners as well will encounter is a crisis of terminology such as objectivism and interpretivism and so forth. As Smith (1998: 15) describes, a mass of "these concepts have become so widely established that they have the same status as articles of faith – they are taken for granted as true." Certainly, the author does accept that these terms are like shorthand for groups of ideas and theories which make us easier to study the world without repeating the same assumptions again and again.

Nevertheless, the author also thinks that it is too dangerous if we depend on these concepts too much, which will block our thinking and make us become inflexible. According to Alvesson & Deetz (2000), the use of language has its limitations associate with the objective of fixing meaning via definitions. They also indicate that there is no one to one relationship between the words and the different social realities. Moreover, they state that "language operates through how the author and reader construct meaning based on the local context, on how discursive logics form associations, how one writes and reads

between the lines, and through appealing to a pre-structured understanding associated with culture and tradition" (p55). Therefore, some frequent words and concepts which have different meanings in different disciplines of social science are quite normal. They may also change in terms of the use of everyday. Thus, although shorthand concepts can offer some common understanding about some social phenomenon, if we blindly worship these dominant definitions without any cautions, the result may be like 'an ethnic cleansing of academic language', which is very dangerous for us and will kill the research flexibility in the cradle. As Martin (1990) claims, the more dominant definitions, the more likely that the phenomenon the definitions represent is only understood by the dominant group. The management researchers should realize the seriousness of domination of terminology and pay attention on this if they do not want to live in the cage of terminology.

Secondly, as Smith (1998: 12-13) claims, "we simply take our theories of how the world works for granted, as unquestionably true. ... *However* ... truth is relative and no one view is superior to any other." In other words, different theories interpret the social reality from different views, no one better than another one. All of theories are like mirrors which reflect the social reality from different angles. Along with continual change of social reality, the theoretical research should change to be in line with the development of reality. It is very difficult to say what the final truth is.

Perhaps today's truth is tomorrow's joke. We never know for sure about that. For example, geocentric model was generally accepted as an objective truth that explains how the universe works. Until Copernicus pointed out the flaw of geocentric model and proposed the Heliocentricism, people began to realize that their truth is not truth anymore. Heliocentricism is seen as the new truth and objective reality until now.

Therefore, according to this example, we can see that there is no final truth or reality we can rely on so that there are no definitely authoritative theories we can depends on. All realities we believe are continually revised and re-established over time. However, most people get use to hold the consensual beliefs as final truth. As Smith (1998) states, people only start to rethink the assumptions behind truth when it is no longer works. Thus, management research should avoid being afterthought. It should avoid to be locked in the cage of existing theories and cognition and only concentrates on the development of abstract theoretical concepts based on so-called scientific method. The management research should have forward looking and be more open to study the social world and accept different ideas. Even these ideas may relate to some sensitive topics such as environment issues and corporate scandal. After all, management research is not a particular capitalist tool only servicing for certain particular social classes or groups. Management research is always seen as at the centre of our lives. Its theories and findings derive from social reality, so that its results should reflect the social

reality in every respect. Perhaps 'throwing the stone' is a bit of too radical, but always 'sleeping with enemy' is certainly not what management research should do.

Conclusion

The questions regarding what is management research is for, what it can do and what it should do are clearly contested, we cannot just respond such questions without looking at various ontological and epistemological controversies. For this paper, the important contribution is to systematically present the various ontological and epistemological positions and critically analyze the different philosophical and sociological positions in the subjective-objective continuum which formed the base of contemporary management research. No matter the management research being claimed as the scientific study of real, prior social phenomenons which can produces objective and law-like results or as the empirical action of that human interprets the world via the use of their experience and common-sense knowledge, they are all just the version of controversies and only represent the point of view of one school or several groups of academics but not final, determinative and absolute truth. Management researchers should not see them as the final truth as well. Any truth is continually developed and revised. Management research as the centre of social research should hold an open and flexible tenet to accept and encourage the development of various ideas rather than merely blindly worship a dominant doctrine.

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