



Reflections on the distinctiveness of European management scholarship



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ABSTRACT

Management scholarship and the journal publication process has been increasingly criticised for being overly elitist and largely irrelevant to the needs of business. There is some justification for such criticisms. Yet, paradoxically, university business schools must resist the urge to be superficially relevant in order to be genuinely useful. I argue here that the very best of management research scholarship relies on a 'scholarship of common sense' that actively mirrors the very best of business and management practices. Artistic rigour, much more than technical rigour is needed. Openness, empirical sensitivity and the capacity for achieving 'flying leaps' of imagination, are to be preferred to procedural adherence in the research process. This alternative understanding of academic rigour and the intellectual richness and diversity of perspectives associated with it is clearly more evident in the British and European intellectual traditions. Such a European-styled management scholarship can help in actively reshaping the intellectual landscape, priorities and parameters of management research by encouraging the kind of scholarly contributions that is not simply technically rigorous, but imaginatively interesting and often counterintuitive.

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Introduction

In a much-publicised announcement reported in *The Guardian* (2013) on 9 December 2013, the 2013 joint Nobel Prize winner for Physiology and Medicine, Randy Schekman revealed in his acceptance speech that he would no longer send research papers to the top-tier academic journals, *Nature*, *Cell* and *Science*. He claims that although these 'luxury' journals are supposed to be the epitome of quality, they have, in fact, inadvertently distorted research priorities and constitute a 'tyranny' in the research publication process that must be broken. Schekman maintains that these journals are more preoccupied with aggressively curating their own brands to increase subscriptions than to stimulating important research. Thus, like "fashion designers who create limited-edition handbags or suits" they artificially restrict the number of papers they accept and then market their journals through the notion of 'impact factor'; a score now widely accepted within the academic world as an accurate measure of a journal's quality. For Schekman, however, this way of measuring and justifying what are supposed to be better journals is as damaging as the bonus culture is to banking. One major consequence is that the pressure to publish in these journals has encouraged younger researchers especially to conform to these norms of expectations in publication

terms rather than to do more important and often peripheral pieces of work that actually lead to genuine scientific progress.

Reacting to these comments, the January 18, 2014 editorial of the medical journal *Lancet* (Klienert & Horton, 2014) proceeded to reflexively ask how its own journal publication process within the field of medical science research ought to change in response to this criticism from one of its best. Perhaps, in the same light, Schekman's very public comments ought to give us in management research some food for thought with regards to our own journal publication ranking process and the direction the 'publications game', which seems to preoccupy much of management academia these days, is taking us. This, together with the perennial question surrounding the relevance/irrelevance of management theory to practice that continues to rumble on, should provide sufficient grounds for us to seriously rethink and reconsider the future of management scholarship particularly within the European management academic context. To be sure these concerns about research contribution and relevance are now beginning to be raised even within the 'top' management journals themselves.

In his Editorial in the February 2014 issue of the *Academy of Management Journal*, the incoming editor Gerard George, in his attempt to rethink management scholarship, signalled what appears to be an important 'shift' in emphasis for the journal's publishing priorities. George (2014, 1–6) argues, quite rightly, that the traditional emphasis on 'technical rigour' and 'theoretical contribution' has distracted attention away from the 'soul of relevance' and

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the ‘applied nature of our field’. A major consequence of this persistent insistence on theoretical rigour is that published studies like ‘black cats in a coal cellar’ become ‘increasingly indistinguishable from previous ones’ especially when the specific contexts within which these studies have been conducted, are surreptitiously removed. George’s comments are reminiscent of the late Sumantra Ghoshal’s (2005, 77) astute observation that, the “pretense of knowledge” which provides legitimacy to management theories that adopt a technically rigorous approach to analysing and explaining management phenomena, is effectively driving out good management practices. Thus, instead of adopting a “scholarship of common sense” (Ghoshal, 2005, 81) that views the researcher, more like Darwin or Freud, as an adventurer (‘conquistador’) or detective rather than a mathematician or man of science, traditional management research has tended to insist on technical rigour as the only acceptable basis for theory generation. Instead, of encouraging the pursuit of fresh and bold ideas and the adoption of less conventional research approaches to seek out anomalies that are intriguing and often counterintuitive, and hence potentially useful, there appears to be an increasing homogenising of research preoccupations and findings as evidenced in much of what ends up being published. George, therefore, proposed that the core of management scholarship ought to be re-conceptualised in terms of a proper balance between rigour and relevance. It is within the terms of this increasing disaffection with the current journal publications processes and emphases and how they are distorting research priorities and preoccupations that I would like to situate this invited commentary for the *European Management Journal*.

For management and organisation journals firmly based within the British and European philosophical, cultural and social traditions and context, perhaps it is timely to take stock of their own publishing mission and priorities vis-à-vis theory and practice and to show in more refreshingly novel ways how genuine management scholarship (one that is grounded in a ‘scholarship of common sense’) can actually contribute meaningfully to the real world of practice without necessarily compromising their academic *raison d’être*. In this short reflective piece, therefore, I shall attempt to develop a counterintuitive and possibly contentious argument that emphasises three interrelated issues that European-based management journals ought to take into consideration in strategically positioning themselves with regards to this rigour/relevance debate in order to genuinely further management scholarship and at the same time make a useful contribution to practice.

First, I want to make the controversial point that the conventionally accepted schism between academic rigour and relevance to the world of practice is an unhelpful and indeed false distinction; one that obscures the oftentimes more nuanced ways in which genuine academic rigour and scholarship can contribute to the world of practice. I shall argue instead that the very best of rigour in scholarship mirrors and is, in principle, indistinguishable from that of the very best kind of thinking in business and management practices. In this very important sense, therefore, to be truly rigorous, in terms of a ‘scholarship of common sense’ is to be genuinely useful and practically relevant. Secondly, I want to suggest that British and European scholarship with its rich intellectual base and sense of history, culture and tradition is best placed to show the way to this exemplary form of academic openness and scholastic imagination that management research ought to emulate if it is to achieve the kind of relevance it seeks. Being very imaginatively theoretical can be actually very practical so much so that Lewin’s (1951, 169) dictum “There is nothing so practical as a good theory” remains as true as ever. Finally, I shall argue that European-based management and organisation journals have immense potential in reshaping the intellectual landscape, priorities and parameters of management research by encouraging the kind of *intellectual entre-*

preneurship (Chia, 1996) and *adventurism* that was perhaps more evident in a previous scholastic era but now increasingly missing in mainstream management research outputs. This entails the scholarly practice of playfully and imaginatively transgressing established boundaries of thought (*entre*) with a view to grasping (*prendre*) opportunities for making fresh connections and reconfiguring relationships to produce important novel insights previously unthought or unthinkable. Such a cultivated entrepreneurial propensity in academic scholarship renders redundant the rigour/relevance distinction because it encourages the same kind of imaginative generalisation and hence expansion of horizons of comprehension that is quintessential to the very best of business enterprise.

The rigour/relevance debate: a false distinction

“The true method of discovery is like the flight of an aeroplane. It starts from the ground of particular observation; it makes a flight in the thin air of imaginative generalization; and it again lands for renewed observation rendered acute by rational interpretation” (Alfred North Whitehead, 1929: *Process and Reality*, 5).

Rigour in management scholarship is usually deemed to imply an unwavering commitment to an established set of methodological procedures that emphasise: thoroughness and precision in terms of familiarity with the extant conceptual literature surrounding the field of study; care and comprehensiveness in terms of the gathering of extensive empirical evidence to support one’s contention; and logical soundness and justification in terms of the claims being made and the casual relationships imputed. In the typical management journal publication process, one is not in a position to make any kind of credible knowledge claim or to be successful in getting published without having diligently observed these procedural protocols. The current conventional knowledge-creating process, therefore, as such is inherently ‘conservative’; it demands an almost ritualised acknowledgement of previous contributors, continuous evidential justification, and logical rigour at every step of the development of an argument. One possible consequence of rigidly adhering to such a formulaic notions of ‘rigour’ is a resultant *rigor mortis*; an intellectual ‘stiffness’ of the mind that discourages any kind of speculative conjecturing including especially the initial capacity to gloss over long stretches of incomprehension and to focus on only those aspects that appear immediately appealing or promising. This approach is deemed unscientific or not rigorous enough. Yet, it is often this tendency, noticeably widespread among young children, that characterises the true method of discovery. The art theorist Anton Ehrenzweig (1967) describes this ability to take “flying leaps” over areas of incomprehension as a “syncretistic approach”, in contrast to the more linear logical method adopted in scientific investigations. It is a feature of inquiry much more understood in the arts than the sciences. This ‘syncretistic approach’ provides us with an alternative understanding of what ‘rigour’ might mean.

A ‘syncretistic approach’ encourages “a diffused, scattered form of attention that contradicts our normal logical habits of thought” (Ehrenzweig, 1967, xii). It elevates ‘unconscious scanning’ over conscious thought so that one gradually learns to “handle ‘open’ structures with blurred frontiers which will be drawn with proper precision only in the unknowable future” (p. 42). In this regard, the urge to prematurely achieve form and proper gestalt is actively resisted. Here scholarly rigour entails not so much the rigid following of procedural protocols, but rather of relentlessly striving to attain an *uncompromising democracy of vision*; one that refuses to accept pre-existing conceptual distinctions between the various elements that make up a phenomenal experience. This is the very

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