



# In search of a soul of relevance for European management research

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## ABSTRACT

The argument is made that contemporary management research is driven by misplaced scientific ideals that keep research at a distance from managerial practice. Misplaced scientific ideals are institutionally reinforced, and therefore hard to change. To provide a viable alternative a different 'soul of relevance' needs to be constructed, which addresses the localized, embedded, fluid and contingent nature of managerial work. Four tenets are suggested that may tentatively form the basis of such work, which are as follows: practice as constitutive of organization, time as ontology, becoming as essence, and heterogeneity of factors. Narrative patterns that combine these tenets may help constitute a soul of relevance that further energizes European management research.

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## Misplaced rigour and relevance

In his piece, 'Reflections on the distinctiveness of European management scholarship', Robert Chia makes an appeal for academic openness and scholastic imagination in European scholarship, which, he suggests, would enable European research to reshape the intellectual landscape of management research. Chia evokes the ghost of rigour and relevance, which seems to haunt researchers, reviewers and editors alike, as they engage actively in a curious sort of truth-based logic rather than a more pragmatic plausibility-based logic in the assessment of research. This form of research assessments reverberates through the academic world and leaves its mark on recruitment processes, the daily work of scholars, the knowledge they impart to practitioners and students, and the ways in which they project their careers as well as their contributions to the wider research community. Paradoxes abound in this whirlpool of conflicting yet immutable demands. Top journals, while insisting on significant theoretical contribution of papers, also insist on meticulous reviews of previous research, bloated methods section and excessive presentations of empirical data, which prevent scholars from properly arguing their theoretical contributions. Paradoxes are also upheld by institutions, which reward publication of papers in top journals where theoretical contribution is demanded, while leaving less time to scholars to engage in research that makes possible those very contributions.

Coupled with incessant demands for 'theoretical contribution', demands of rigour and relevance risk sending the field further away from the world of practitioners. The drive towards misplaced notions

of truth imposes incommensurate demands on scholars between the ideology imposed by journals and the fluid world of inquiry with which they engage. Hence [George's \(2014\)](#) claim that attention is distracted away from the 'soul of relevance' and the 'applied nature of our field'. The philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, who maintained a strong concern with the relationship between practice, science and philosophy, described the journey from practice to theory as a journey from the concrete into the abstract. This journey, he pointed out, is necessary for society to evolve. Still, he pointed out, the most critical passage is on the journey back from abstractions to living, concrete reality, as abstraction may lead us away from the real complexity of nature ([Whitehead, 1938](#)). It is the journey back that sometimes leads to what he famously called 'fallacy of misplaced concreteness' ([Whitehead, 1929, 2](#)). His point is that theorizing, while describing concrete experience, may forget the concrete world it tries to describe to become a misplaced version of practice, which nevertheless is thought to be a representation of the concrete world. Still, he suggested that, 'There can be no objection to this procedure, however, as long as we know what we are doing' ([Whitehead, 1938, 10](#)). In other words, researchers should be the masters of the abstractions, and not the other way around.

## Incommensurate ideals, lying and shame

A logic of misplaced scientific ideals demands increasing amounts of data to back up even the most of trivial claims at times, without being checked by more fundamental questions as to the actual relevance of the data to the dynamic reality on the ground. More data are demanded, as opposed to more precise data, which is why methods sections of articles in certain journals take on disproportionate dimensions rather than address targeted findings with specific methods. Truth becomes an ideal, and the problem of ideals is that they induce lying as and when they become inconsistent with

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the reality on the ground (March, 2007). Lying arises when reality and ideals become irreconcilable as March points out. People however, rarely live up their ideals, and lying is used as a means to give the impression that ideals are achieved (March, 2007). A problem is that as lying takes hold, the legitimacy of misplaced ideals is maintained, as there is nothing to enable questioning of these ideals. Paradoxically it is the failure to achieve the ideals that actually ends up maintaining those same ideals. As people's extent of lying increases, the more strongly the ideals are upheld and the more difficult it becomes to question or dismantle them. Instead the process becomes a spiral of increasing demands for ideal behaviour, inducing more lying in turn. Becoming engaged in a process of lying does not mean that people are liars per se. On the contrary, they experience lying as shameful, and it therefore instils them with a sense of guilt. Thus shame emerges among scholars as they grapple with trying to live up to misplaced scientific ideals. The good news is that the shame is caused, not by lack of scientific ability for rigour, but by incommensurate ideals that were misplaced in the first place. Still, the actual process of lying is a social and relational one, and becomes institutionally endorsed, as authors, reviewers and editors tend to "look away" when faced with the fact that the field of management and the ideals of rigour and relevance become incommensurate. Instead there are demands for more data under the pretext that sheer volume will make up for a weak argument. Unfortunately, then, the spiral has no happy ending. Potentially good case studies sometimes end up anaesthetized by perspectives more than by what they reveal of organizational life, which is logical because perspectives have their communities, from which reviewers are recruited, and which cite one another in turn, enabling journals to prosper, publishers to make more money, curricula to be created and beliefs sustained in the relevance of the perspectives taught in the curricula. Again a spiral, separate from the spiral of lying, but entangled with it.

In North America, for example, this spiral is somewhat sustained institutionally by the American Academy of Management (AoM), where institutional and editorial responsibilities, celebrated through awards and citations, are entangled with merits in terms of cited papers in top journals in which incommensurate ideals are practised. As people take up positions they cannot readily question the merits of publication that got them there in the first place, and it becomes hard to break out of the mold. Such webs of entanglement may become extraordinarily strong. The recent launching of the journal *Academy of Management Discovery*, dedicated to 'promote the creation and dissemination of new empirical evidence that strengthens our understanding of substantively important yet poorly understood phenomena concerning management and organizations' (<http://aom.org/amd/>) appears an important initial step out of the spiral. The expression 'creation of new empirical evidence' is worth noting because it suggests philosophy of science view that departs from the idea of discovery of a reality lying there to be discovered and deciphered to a reality whose richness is engaged with and co-created with those who live it. The aim of the journal resonates in part with the idea of empirical evidence as 'capta' as opposed to 'data', to which I will return at the end of the paper.

### The fallacies of slicing

When a fluid and partly intangible situation, such as that found in managerial practice, is abstracted (made into a 'thing') in order to make it available for scientific scrutiny inherited from the natural sciences, the concreteness is misplaced (as Whitehead would have it) as and when the thing gets to be taken as the managerial reality, and not a provisional image of it. Again, according to Whitehead, there is nothing wrong with treating as a thing something that is essentially fluid in order to make sense of it, as long as we know

what we are doing. There is, in other words, nothing wrong with applying methods, concepts and vocabularies from the natural sciences, as long as we do not treat them as a truth. It is when we don't know what we are doing, however, that it becomes a fallacy. The airplane allegory that Chia borrows from Whitehead applies here, as Whitehead's idea was that the imaginative generalization from concrete experience could be seen as a journey in an airplane that would eventually land it back where it came from. If we spend too much time in an airplane we forget what the world on the ground looks like, and the inside world of the airplane slowly begins to replace the earthly reality as we know it. Multiple projections of images from the earth on the cabin screen may delude the passengers into thinking that they are actually looking at an earthly reality and not an image of it.

Incommensurate ideals are intimately related to the misplaced concreteness, found in the slicing of the fluid reality of practitioners into stable categories, which then become congealed as misplaced images of the realities of practitioners. The slicing of reality into categories has served science since Aristotle, and is the very basis for the scientific ideals practised by prominent management journals. It is rooted in studies going back at least as far as the 1960s. Slicing enables correspondence between different organizational types and between organizations and their environments to be assessed. It has been the bedrock of organization theory that has given it a standing in the social sciences.

The slicing has, however, come at a high cost, because Whitehead's airplane has not been allowed to land in the richness of organizational life, from which abstractions were initially derived. To be fair, the richness of organizational life has been captured in a broad range of areas of organization theory, where notions such as embeddedness, process, sensemaking, practice, etc. have been applied. A number of interesting studies have also been published, which address the richness of organizational life, in a variety of journals. In spite of their quality, the studies are not sufficient to stem the wave of misplaced natural science criteria, which continue to prevail in a number of prestigious journals.

The last time there was a grand narrative that contrasted with natural science ideals was paradoxically postmodernism, which was manifestly anti-grand-narrative movement. Still, although it advocated deconstruction, it became a normative force, then inevitably a political force, which is the way things go in academia, as thought worlds turn into thought communities, which may take on tribal dimensions in turn. Unfortunately it became a force without direction, which is logical, given its underlying principle of deconstruction, but nevertheless sad, because it could not match the powerful force of its opponent, the natural science ideals. Thus misplaced scientific ideals prevail because their narrative is directed towards the lofty ideal of natural science, which treats facts as truths, and not as workable possibilities. Hence a flight is boarded that leaves behind the world of practice without its passengers knowing how it will return.

No wonder postmodernism could not make it. It could not fight a fair battle with misplaced scientific ideals, which can at any time brand the weapon of rightness, which may again slip into righteousness. Postmodernism could only offer moral appeal. In a paradigm of misplaced scientific ideals reviewers tend to ask, "show us that it is true", rather "show us why this is interesting", or "show us why this is novel", or "show us why this is relevant to practice". True, we are sometimes asked to demonstrate novelty, but not without the sometimes unjustified proof burden that comes with misplaced scientific ideals. We cannot argue against misplaced scientific ideals, because they can only see the world through their own language and logic. In this sense it is mute to other communicative worlds. The extent to which it will heed other logics, it can only do so when those logics are translated into its own language of rigour and relevance.

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