Perspectives on Management Research Design and Orientation: Quandaries and Choices

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to discuss some of the quandaries or difficult choices that affect detailed research design as well as the 'big' orientations or paradigms that motivate studies in the field of business and management research. Many of these choices and decisions are now commonly assumed to be mere preferences, no longer worthy of debate. As in the case of whether to collect data that is say, more easily quantified than qualified. Or whether the demands of practice are incommensurable with those of the social sciences. Such oppositions and tensions are discussed here in the context of recent surveys of managerial work.

Keywords business and management research, credibility, incommensurability, quantitative, qualitative

1. Introduction

Within the past twenty years or so there has been an exponential growth in advice and assistance to researchers and students in the field of management research (see for example, Lyotard, 1986). Whilst the many textbooks and articles on experiences in practice are to be welcomed, there is a downside to this wealth of information. For instance, it can become all too easy to forget the limits of particular research methods when the focus is on scholasticism or the details of their associated techniques. This may be especially problematic if it is assumed that the selection of one or other method is a function of mere preference. To illustrate the significance of some of these inherent problems- the extent of current quandaries and choices- comparisons are made here between data gathered through the two media of a) mail surveys and b) face-to-face interviews. These comparisons focus on the following aspects and oppositions:

- General concepts of 'quantitative' and 'qualitative' research as they have limited and facilitated the surveys, even though many now assume this to be a defunct debate (see for example, Giddens, 1984).
- Differing requirements for 'structure' and 'process' in the design of the surveys.
- Contradictory and confirmatory values, attitudes, needs and expectations of a) overall research orientations; b) the researchers engaged in the studies; and c) those that took part in the surveys. This is with a view to reconciling differences, which others argue may be incommensurable (see for example, Hassard and Kelemen, 2002; Jackson and Carter, 1991).

The surveys are with reference to recent Management Research Centre (MRC), Telford projects, which are briefly as described below. Taken as a whole the investigations consider, or are rather an ambitious attempt to re-consider, take stock of and debate the current realities of managerial work at the beginning of the new millennium. Over a four-year period, the MRC undertook a large-scale longitudinal study of managers' experiences of 'change' using conventional anonymous mail responses (Worrall and Cooper, 1997-2001). Three years later, this was followed by a series of in depth face-to-face interviews with some fifty executive and senior managers in large organizations and institutions (Jones, forthcoming 2004; Worrall and Jones, forthcoming 2005). This research was further supplemented by a number of commissioned surveys in local authorities. Reflections on the limits and benefits of these researches have provided a useful reminder of those aspects that tend to be taken-for-granted or readily accepted as intrinsic to the processes.

2. Surveys and quantified *versus* qualified evidence

By word definition, 'quantitative' expresses 'bigness' or 'largeness' with expectations of specified amounts or sums in methods of analysis and data collection. Similarly, and in contrast, 'qualitative' suggests 'what', 'what kind' and 'who' defines the data and the methods by which they are obtained. Yet, paradoxically in practice, in research designed to be verified quantitatively- strong on facts and figures- it is easier to characterize elements qualitatively than it is to assess them numerically. As regards qualitative research evidence, the reverse holds true.

In gathering data for studies in management research where evidence is to be quantified, 'what is going on' in organizations, for example, is readily captured in single categories. Such concepts as 'motivation', 'leadership' and 'management style' are employed without too much concern to unpick the complexities of meaning of the selected phenomena before going on to devise intricate metrics in attempts to measure them. The usual measures as 'strong', 'weak', 'authoritarian' and the like tend to be perhaps surprisingly imprecise and highly qualitative given the mathematical rigors they are subjected to in the course of subsequent analyses.

Reflecting on these limitations, it could be argued that in general, anonymous response surveys take advantage of the Wittgensteinian notion of 'meaning-in-use'. This is the idea of assuming a common, non-technical, non-specific understanding of words simply to track trends or patterns of usage as in the surveys under discussion here. Respondents in this case were asked to categorize perceptions of 'management', for instance in the questions of 'management style', as either 'authoritarian or consensual'. By using such extreme response alternatives, it was possible to track the primary concern, which was 'change over time', as experienced by the selected panel of managers. Whilst it was not possible to declare, what percentage is authoritarian or that managers in the public sector are more or less authoritarian than those in the private sector, the mapping of sets of polar constructs have shown some interesting patterns.

2.1 Validity

To give a flavour of some of the quandaries in research design and administration, 'face' and 'construct' validity and are compared. The former is an estimate of whether 'on the face of it' the audience for whom it is intended will take the instrument seriously.

The latter is a measure of the extent to which individual items encapsulate complex concepts or traits. In terms of these criteria, mail surveys appear strong on face validity based on the response rates (1,362 in 1997; 1,313 in 1998; 1,213 in 1999; and 1,516 in 2000) (Worrall and Cooper, 1997-2001), but considerably weak on construct validity as a measure of the particular trait, say, of managerial style (see figure 1). Even had the respondents been offered a wider range of styles between 'authoritarian' and 'consensual', together with descriptors of behaviour, 'managerial style' in practice is probably rarely, if ever, a permanent disposition.

Q1 STRONG FACE VALIDITY (SVF) / WEAK CONSTRUCT VALIDITY (WCV)	QII WEAK FACE VALIDITY (WVF) / WEAK CONSTRUCT VALIDITY (WCV)
MAIL SURVEYS (SVF) because of scale and perceived authority WCV because the constructs are often heavily reliant on "borrowed" measures obtained for some other purpose	MAIL SURVEYS (WFV) because of questionnaire overuse and 'fatigue' INTERVIEWS (WCV) because the time limit may prevent sufficient opportunity to probe constructs
QIV STRONG FACE VALIDITY (SVF) / STRONG CONSTRUCT VALIDITY (SCV)	**QIII WEAK FACE VALIDITY (WVF) / STRONG CONSTRUCT VALIDITY (SCV)**
INTERVIEWS (SVF) because of perceived authority. Content can be readily adapted to a given situation and (SCV) because the live process enables interviewers to tap into designated constructs	INTERVIEWS (WFV) where interviewees perceive a lack of credibility in the the interviewers MAIL SURVEYS (SCV) unlikely where constructs assume a constant, closed clarity resistant to ambiguities and evolving understandings

Figure 1: Examples of mapping face validity and construct validity for mail surveys and interviews

Insofar as qualitative studies are concerned, although the main interest is in understanding concepts such as 'motivation', 'leadership' and 'management style', it is a simpler matter to log, code and count up apparent reoccurrences of phenomena, say instances of 'autocracy', than it is to explain them in some non-self-referential way. Contemporary approaches to grounded theory illustrate the practice of trying to qualify concepts, for instance, mainly by measuring typical extents to which they are employed. Often ideas of saturation are used. In other words, privileging similarities of responses over rare, individual insights.

To avoid this dilemma, aspects of the interviews were not only coded and categorized. Each face-to-face encounter was also viewed as a single case study and moreover, as one to which the researchers were given privileged access. This was not merely as observers of symptoms but as experiential participants in collecting unique accounts, both theirs and those of the researchers. Probably worth noting here in terms of designing and conducting credible interviews is that the interviewers are experienced managers.

Thus it has been possible to benefit from both clustering and mapping responses towards formulating new theories, as well as picking up on rich new research leads. A number of these are shared below.

3. Surveys and 'structure' *versus* 'process'

Professor Cooper (1999) reminds us of the distinctions between 'process' - and interestingly, the inseparability of- 'structure'. For the purposes of the discussions here, 'structure' is about stability or quasi-stability, 'process' about change. To separate out 'structure', the tendency is to understand it when it is part of a process such as organization and to appreciate 'process' only when it is subjected to some form of structure.

Thus in the interviews referred to above, the researchers are confident that they would probably not have observed the behaviours worth noting had they a) merely asked the respondents for their informal opinions without the structure of a formal interview; or b) so structured the interviews that they may as well have given the interviewees questionnaires. Take the case of the liberating effects on the researcher and the researched. There is a strong belief that these materialized because interviewees and interviewers allowed the interview structure to temporarily disintegrate so as to become immersed in the benefits of 'pure' process.

When this was achieved, the interviews became an authentic, relaxed, trusted, sharing of views. Where it did not happen, as in the situation of 'rehearsed' interviewee responses (which became apparent after four consecutive interviews with senior executives in one organization), the interviews emerged as both pointless and pointing. As unwitting players in a game, the researchers were left feeling irritated with the stage-managed interactions. However, on reflection there was a sense of having been party to curiously rich observations on the particular organization. Negative effects also occurred when the interviewers asked questions on aspects of 'change' that appeared to require second-hand information or over-stretched the respondents' experiences in some way. These however only temporarily disrupted the interview process.

With regard to the mail surveys, the direct questions on 'change' give no indication of comparative magnitudes of 'change' or its implications for the anonymous individual respondents. This is a limitation of the structuring of a survey. Surveys usually enable researchers to test only one dimension of the selected sample's opinion. Although in the case under discussion, this method enabled the researchers to single out highly significant findings. For instance to gauge the number of managers who had been party to 'change', which in any one year was some 60% of those who took part in the study.

It was, however, only through the deep, person-to-person interviews, that it was possible to explore some of the other dimensions of this 'change'. The widespread prevalence, for instance, of a 'me-too' phenomenon emerged through discussions. Repeated large-scale changes are being introduced, for example, only because competitors are outsourcing services, locating offshore call centres or instituting other major reorganizations. Not to follow the trend, it was suggested, would be more closely questioned in a climate where perceptions of success are so closely allied to stock market performance.

4. Surveys and differing views on management research

In figure 2, certain contradictory motivations for conducting business and management research are counterpoised. To avoid a complex controversial debate into theories of incommensurability, the focus is on two specific aspects. First, the discussion centres on some of the implications of 'buying in' to the authority of the different paradigms. Although relatively simplistic paradigms are presented, the patterned approaches associated with each can have a profound influence on survey design and process. Second, the consequences of such approaches are considered. In particular, the interest is in the researcher views of those that take part in the research. There is also the wider effect of each research orientation on the other three paradigms, as well as on the research community as a whole. For the purposes here, incommensurability is taken as the absence of common standards (values, attitudes, needs and expectations) in business and management research.

I Consultancy approach

The overriding espoused value is objectivity, typified by such 'externalities' as the consultant, the manner of the investigation and the presentation of the findings (see for example, Worrall *et al*, 2003). Impressions management is likely to be as important as the findings. Hence, therein is the danger of compromising integrity. This may be in attempts say to meet client expectations and to underplay politically sensitive ambiguities, controversial issues in the study, or to be pragmatic about what the research is likely to contribute to the field of management research (see for example, Collinson, 2004). Published references may be more important than researcher insights. Relationships tend to be transactional, determined by what the client can afford to buy in terms of services, which are likely to be menu-driven or an algorithmic approach rather than bespoke. Attitude is measured in terms of the consultant's fitness for the purpose of the research, usually based on professional qualifications, academic standing and past experience of projects of similar scale and type. In terms of client-consultant expectations, time and budgets form the essence of the contract. For purposes of credibility, the consultant in this mode generally adopts and maintains a detached 'professionalism'. This detachment tends to extend to the human subjects studied where they are liable to contribute only as a collection of objects of interest.

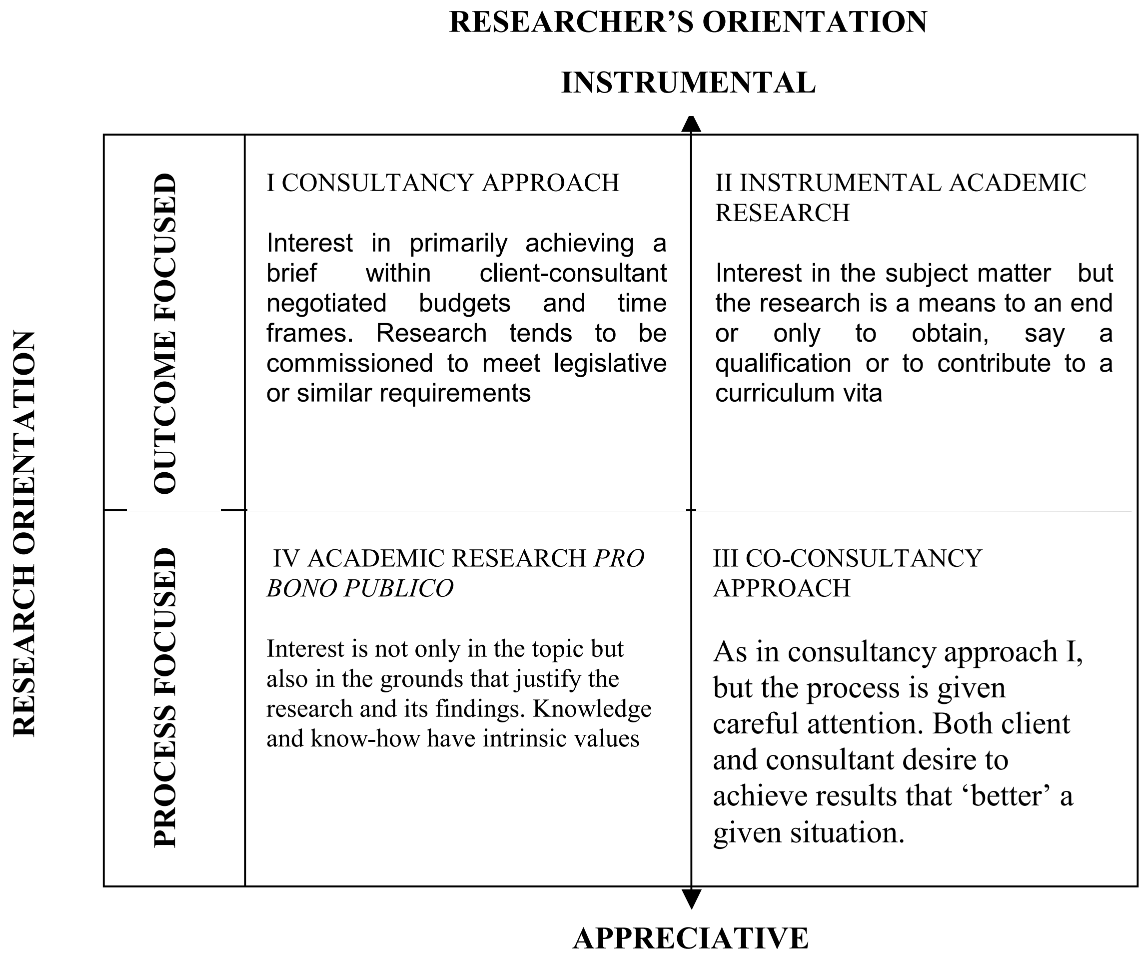

Figure 2: Examples of differing researcher values, attitudes, needs and expectations of management research

II Instrumental academic research

Typically associated with career researchers and this includes students. A secondary value of the research is its usefulness, which in general is closely subject to the value judgements of others (research sponsors, editors, symposium organizers, academic standards). As such, the research is willingly tailored to particular requirements. The ideas, skew and presentation are wide open to negotiation. Ownership of the research may be relatively unimportant. This may lead to an unemotional distance between the researcher, the process and the findings. The primary value is the status or opportunities the research affords the researcher through recognition, publications and qualifications. Human subjects researched contribute as a means to this end and are treated in accordance with the protocols and expectations of specified research approaches.

III Co-consultancy approach

Consciousness is an important value in seeking to create meaningful changes. To bring in an outsider, or appoint insiders to raise consciousness levels within an organization requires a carefully navigated relationship between 'client' and the consultant, who is likely to be valued for particular personal attributes. The interventions can be of various types from mentoring internal change agents to facilitating change processes through action research. The concerns are not to so alienate those affected as to jeopardize the change. Here the consultant walks a fine line between maintaining and altering power relationships in pursuit of some future (improved) organization (see for example, Jones, Baldridge and Worrall, 2004). The value for the research subjects

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participating in the research is high risk, because it can only be measured in terms of the eventual outcomes.

IV Academic research pro bono publico

The desire is to study the social world *in-situ* as it were. Knowledge is of value for its own sake. *Pro bono publico*, for the public good, does sometimes describe professional (medical, legal) services given free of charge. The explicit freedom/goodness/publics here, however, are the activities associated with authenticity. Authenticity implies genuineness and the spirit of generosity, the qualities that seem to transcend political intrigue, contrivance, resentment and expedience. In research terms, this probably means producing 'good' research that generates more 'good' research. The research that is likely to enrich the community of business and management researchers through fellowship and credible studies. In so doing, to generate knowledge that might be expected to benefit wider society. Dissemination of this knowledge tends to be through the classic teaching process, seminars, conferences, working papers, peer review and the publication of textbooks and monographs. The driver for such research may be a deeply felt need or volition that is difficult to articulate except through the research. There is likely to be a collegiate expectation of a corresponding deep concern (ethical, moral, affective) for those participating in and informing the research, who perhaps benefit intrinsically from the involvement (making their views known for instance). As such, traditional academic research stands as a challenge to the other three approaches, which are more intent on external aims- adjusting the status quo, making improvements, and so on.

5. Conclusions

As the above has attempted to illustrate, highly intellectualised debates are not needed to surface the many quandaries and tensions contemporary researchers face within the field of business and management research. For, although the demands on us as researchers may be complex, the 'big' choices appear relatively straightforward. The decisive factors seem as likely to depend on professional ambitions and/or comfort zones as they do on inherent paradigm criteria. The latter criteria that come with the territory as it were: the established values, attitudes, needs and expectations of particular research protocols and methods. If there are issues of incommensurability, these are probably more closely allied to personal moralities and research orientation than research design. For instance, regardless of one's preferences for a particular approach, one can readily accept that anonymous surveys and in-depth interviews measure differing aspects of say, managerial work. That in the interests of 'good' research- even given its multiplicities of meanings- the requirements for data presented as statistics (see for example, Moser,) are probably as valid as those for case studies (see for example, Yin, 1994). That said it might be more difficult to 'buy into' or exploit opportunities that do not easily mesh with deeply held views. Whilst the community of business and management researchers embraces a broad affiliation to very different design philosophies, methodologies or approaches to research, it is, nevertheless, held together by what appears as a common integrity. Personal beliefs about what constitutes 'good' or worthwhile research in the sense of grand, or even not so grand paradigms. The collective integrity that has structured the discipline, integrated the community and influenced its standing thus far in academia, the world of business and society. It would seem therefore that all work done in the name of business and management research has the potential to manipulate wider perceptions and hence the credibility of the discipline, its study and practices. For this reason, the quandaries and 'big' decisions about what to research, how to design and conduct this research, whom to research, appear as much an individual as a communal responsibility. Similar obligations would seem to apply in the training of new researchers given their future contribution to sustaining business and management research as an important branch of learning.

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