Evidence in Management Research:
Some Conceptual Issues

Vasant V. Bang, DELTA M Management R&D Lab, Pune, India
Milind T. Phadtare, National Institute of Construction Management and Research, Pune, India

ABSTRACT

Scholars point out a fundamental difference between research in disciplines of management and natural sciences. Using stakeholder framework, in this paper, the authors first define domain of management research from practitioners’ perspective. Then, they highlight contextual nature of management and argue that practitioners and researchers differ in terms of extent of generalisation they are interested in. The authors present a framework which links management research to practice and identify conceptual issue related to reliability and validity. Statistical techniques generally try to decipher a pattern. But innovation by definition amounts to breaking free from the pattern. A formula which led to success of one organisation at one point of time can be intentionally disrupted by managers in competing organisations. This is possible because human beings are endowed with three unique characteristics of cognition, judgment and intention. This explains limitations of management research in predicting future on the basis of valid explanations of today. That is why even if managers try to search for a common reality in a replicable fashion, managerial practice may not necessarily benefit.

KEYWORDS

Evidence, Innovation, Management Practice, Management Research, Reliability, Validity

INTRODUCTION

Proponents of evidence based management argue that using better & deeper logic and employing facts to the extent possible permits managers to do their jobs better (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006). Hence, research becomes an important tool of evidence based management. Research can be used to understand as to ‘what works’ & ‘what doesn’t’ as Pfeffer and Sutton put it. Proponents of evidence based management often cite Peters and Waterman’s (1982) ‘In Search of Excellence’ and Collins’s (2001) ‘Good to Great’ as examples of work not backed by empirical studies.

While writing ‘Is there such a thing as evidence based management?’ in her role as the sixtieth Academy of Management president, Rousseau (2006) observed “It is ironic that I came to write this article in my role.” Pointing out a research-practice gap, Rousseau acknowledges that the answer to the question she raised is no—at least not yet. Scholars have identified various challenges to evidence based management as no set pattern for conducting evaluation, role of social & political processes in managerial decisions, disproportionate effort and cost, lack of resources, lack of time & data (Armstrong, Brown & Reilly, 2011) integrating and aligning outcomes into the input and throughput and apprehension regarding management for results (van Loon et. al., 2013).

In order to understand reasons behind research – practice gap, in this paper we raise a few conceptual issues related to evidence in management research. Like Rousseau other scholars have also raised concerns about gap between management research and practice (Ex., Maital, Prakhya & Seshadri, 2008). Hence, we first make an attempt to define domain of management research from the
point of view of organisational & managerial practice. Then we raise issues arising out of contextual nature of management. We present a conceptual framework that can be used to understand link between management research & practice. Finally, we raise some conceptual issues in management research and discuss limits to the predictive power of management research.

DEFINING DOMAIN OF MANAGEMENT RESEARCH WITH A FOCUS ON PRACTICE

According to Rousseau, Manning and Denyer (2008) management & organisational science encompasses theory and research on organizations and associated human behaviours, as workers, managers, and customers. Clarckson (1995) goes a step further as he visualises corporation as a system of primary stakeholder groups and observes that a corporation’s survival & continuing success requires that various stakeholder groups continue as a part of corporation’s stakeholder system. This in turn depends upon ability of a corporation’s managers to create sufficient wealth, value or satisfactions for the stakeholders. He also acknowledges power of secondary stakeholder groups like media which can harm a corporation. Clarckson (1995) observes that corporate data is available in terms of relationship of organisation with respect to various stakeholder groups since most corporations define obligations, responsibilities, & accountability for managers with respect to these groups. Hence, in this paper we use ‘stakeholder framework’ to classify managerial practices. We believe that using ‘stakeholder management’ as an organising principle for domain of management research can be a starting point in reducing the research – practice gap. Organisational practices can be broadly classified as external stakeholder (Customers, Suppliers, Investors, Government, Public, etc.) related (ESP) and internal stakeholder related (employees) (ISP). Generally, research on external stakeholders related practices includes domains of marketing, finance & strategy, while research on internal stakeholders includes domains of human resources, operations & systems.

A core aim of scientific research is to arrive at objective, true beliefs about the subject matter of the discipline: about what sorts of entities are to be found, what their properties are, and what causal relations obtain among them (Daniel, 1993). This clearly indicates that identifying causal relations among entities is one of the goals of research though not the only goal. Hence we propose that from the point of view of reducing gap between management research & practice, domain of management research be described in terms of internal & external stakeholder related practices besides their antecedents, moderators and consequences.

Contextual Nature of Management

Aim of research in social science, of which management is a type, is to arrive at true factual beliefs about social and historical phenomena, and to arrive at sound explanations of these phenomena (Daniel, 1993). As discussed above the phenomena examined in management research can be conceptualised using antecedents, moderators, practices & consequences chain. Management research aims to arrive at true factual beliefs about components of this chain either in isolation or in relation to each other. A fact is a singular statement that identifies one or more entities and attributes a property or relation to the entity or entities, with or without a reference to time. Properties possessed by entities, relations identified by these properties & terms of relation are contextual in nature. Contextual nature of management has been highlighted by many scholars. For instance, Bloom & Reenen (2010) observe that there are no typical “good” or “bad” management practices with universal applicability.

The term context is used to refer to the environment or setting in which management is practiced (Kitson, Harvey & McCormack, 1998). Chin’s (1985) description of environment as multiple-clusters and multiple-systems points towards spatial dimension of context. CAGE framework proposed by
Knowledge Sharing Barriers
[www.igi-global.com/chapter/knowledge-sharing-barriers/16990?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/chapter/knowledge-sharing-barriers/16990?camid=4v1a)

Reconceptualizing the Knowledge Hierarchy for Management Education
[www.igi-global.com/article/reconceptualizing-the-knowledge-hierarchy-for-management-education/130710?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/article/reconceptualizing-the-knowledge-hierarchy-for-management-education/130710?camid=4v1a)