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Relevance and creativity through design-driven action research: Introducing *pragmatic adequacy*

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Summary This study presents a meta-synthesis (1904–2010) of seminal voices on the ‘relevance gap’, the abyss between management science and management practice, and on remedies proposed. We then discuss dominant paradigms about truth and meaning and demonstrate how they can lead to irrelevance. We discuss relevance and its implications. We revisit basic notions of pragmatism and suggest how they might influence the meaning of management science. We seek answers in action research and, more specifically, in design-driven action research methods. We introduce the notion of *pragmatic adequacy* to explain how design-driven action research approaches can reduce the relevance gap, facilitate change and enhance creativity.

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Introduction

Management innovation is happening everywhere and at a breathtaking pace. Everywhere that is, except in academia. Management science still functions by and large in splendid isolation from praxis, over a century after Dewey (1904) detected fundamental tensions in the “proper relation” between theory and practice (too), and over forty years after Koontz deplored the “Management Theory Jungle” (Koontz, 1961) and Odiorne wrote his salient animadversion:

“There are many indications that a serious breakdown is present in management and business theory in the western world. At the very time there is a desperate need for sound and appealing explanations of the nature of administered capitalism, and the leaders in it, academic management theory seems bankrupt. There are no plausible syntheses, and the behavioral theories require a kind of salesman (...) to try to persuade managers that their wares are the tools of salvation. Quantitative models of management theory contribute obscure tautologies covering the least significant fraction of the business environment. The empirical searchers for uniformities...reach for ponderous principles that generalize into proofs that which is merely indication taken from artefacts. Such studies of course have their place, but they have meaning only when they pervade the world

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of concrete experience as well as the special fields of science and theory.” (1966, p. 109)

While there is longstanding and intense awareness among both academics and practitioners of what came to be called a ‘relevance gap’, i.e. that the output of theory often fails to have impact on what practitioners do (see e.g. Ghoshal, 2005; Grayson, 1973; Hambrick, 1994; Huff, 2000; Miller & Feldman, 1983; Priem & Rosenstein, 2000; Rynes, Bartunek, & Daft, 2001; Weick, 2001, and especially Rynes, Giluk, & Brown, 2007), and while there is debate on what the problem really is (Bunge, 1967; Davies, 2006) and possible solutions to deal with this issue (McKelvey, 2006; Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006; Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006), no substantial rapprochement can be noted. An exhausting – but by no means exhaustive – meta-synthesis of voices on the theme is presented in Table 1 which, due to its substantial length, is placed at the end of the paper.

Many believe that bridging this gap starts with re-examination of the ontological status of management science and more broadly of its philosophical foundations (Mingers, 2003). For them, the dilemma is that “...organisational researchers live in two worlds. The first demands and rewards speculations about how to improve performance. The second demands and rewards adherence to rigorous standards of scholarship” (March & Sutton, 1997, p. 698). McKelvey (2002, 2003a, 2003b) addresses the issue by a call for a rapprochement to truth, as he purports the reinvention of organisation science through methods that better justify beliefs, i.e. that rest on more plausible truth findings without ignoring the complexity of the intricate, multi-causal reality of managers. His proposal is based on a merger of complexity and a post-modernist ontology embodied in what he calls “Cambellian realism” and agent-based modelling. Recently he also emphasized the need of management research to focus on extreme events because “managers don’t worry about averages; they live in a world of extremes, and they want more of the good ones and wonder how to better avoid bad ones” (McKelvey, 2006, p. 828).

We agree that the relevance gap is a natural consequence of the prevailing paradigms of management science. Social phenomena are not physics and therefore need to be studied differently. However, ontological adequacy is probably not the main issue. In some sense it does not matter what is out there in the world. The main issue is epistemological: what *can* we know? Naturally, this is related, but one can disagree on the ontological status and still agree on what a good reason is, or what is relevant for management science. The relevance gap is therefore about how we can close the gap (epistemological) between us and the entities, whatever their ontological status. McKelvey’s agenda centres on making management science more scientific and does not fully address the question of relevance to practice. To focus on extreme events can improve the practical pertinence of produced knowledge. But it does not fully resolve the relevance gap.

In this paper we start by showing *that, how* and *why* dominant paradigms about truth and meaning can lead to irrelevance, and we discuss relevance and its implications. We then revisit some basic notions of pragmatism and sug-

gest how they might influence the nature of management science. We follow with some thoughts on the design science paradigm, on action research and on design-driven action research that, we purport, cannot only help to narrow the relevance gap, but favour change and enhance creativity.

Truth, meaning and relevance in management research

Judging by academic publications most management research is aimed at advancing theory, which is producing statements such as “...if the environment becomes more complex, then the company has to decentralize its decision making.” We happen to believe that this particular statement is plausible, and there is ample literature in support of it. But that is not the point. The point is that in aspiring to reduce to such statements the knowledge required for management, management science is following in the footsteps of physics and other natural sciences. A theory, in such sciences, is a collection of statements in the form “if a then b.” The ideal is that a manager versed in relevant theory would know that doing x under conditions α will lead with reasonable certainty to conditions β . And indeed sometimes predictions, extrapolations and policy action do lead to outcomes that were expected, planned and intended.

But practitioners know that for many of their more complex problems this is simply not so. First, because few theories exist for such multi-causal issues that provide predictions with any reasonable precision. Complexity leads to unpredictability (Thompson, 1967). Second, the corporate environment is full of intelligent opponents that constantly change their behaviour (King & Cleland, 1978; Lorange & Vancil, 1977; Steiner, 1979; Wooldridge & Floyd, 1989), necessitating, what Huff describes as: “...an ‘artful blend of resources and action and the capacity to respond to surprise (Huff, Tranfield, & van Aken, 2006)’”. Third, the manager may not be very clear on what the right thing to do is. At times, managers, even at lower levels, rely on their intuition; hesitate and improvise (Fendt, 2005; Fombrum, 1986; Jauch & Kraft, 1986; Mintzberg, Raisinghani, & Théorêt, 1976; Nystrom, Hedberg, & Starbuck, 1976; Pinfield, 1986; Quinn & Cameron, 1988; Weick, 1977).

Physics, when establishing that objects will always gravitate towards the earth, assumes that all their qualities other than mass are irrelevant: shape, aesthetic appeal, usefulness or colour do not influence the dynamics of motion. Similarly, biologists studying the eating patterns of mice do not individuate among their subjects. How is it possible to treat corporations in the same manner? They may be alike in some respects, but mostly managers break their necks to be different. And even academics call for corporations to individuate: In Porter’s generic competitive strategies (1980) organisations are encouraged to strive toward securing a competitive advantage by distinguishing themselves from their competitors using such means as design, customer service, image, packaging, and additional functionality in ways which are perceived by customers as adding value. In fact, such individuating action embraces everything other than efficiency and economies of scale.

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