

The SAGE Encyclopedia of Social Science Research Methods

Management Research

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The academic discipline of management evolved rapidly in the 1960s within the United States and in the 1980s in most other parts of the world and is consequently a relative newcomer to the pantheon of the social sciences. In the early days, it drew very heavily on related disciplines such as economics, sociology, anthropology, statistics, and mathematics. But more recently, there has been a growing appreciation that these related disciplines are inadequate in themselves for handling the complex theoretical and practical problems posed in the management domain.

Three distinctive features of management research imply a need both to adapt traditional social science methods and to identify new ways of conducting research. First, there is a marked difference between the practice of management and the academic theories about management. The former draws eclectically on ideas and methods to tackle specific problems; the latter adopts distinct disciplinary frameworks to examine aspects of management. The adoption of disciplines, ranging from highly quantitative subjects such as finance, economics, and operations research to highly qualitative subjects such as organization behavior and human resource development, makes it hard to achieve consensus on what constitutes high-quality research. It has also led to a sustained debate about the relative merits of adopting monodisciplinary or transdisciplinary perspectives (Kelemen & Bansal, 2002; Tranfield & Starkey, 1998).

The second issue concerns the stakeholders of management research because managers, the presumed objects of study, will normally have the power to control ACCESS and may also be in a position to provide or withdraw financial sponsorship from the researcher.

This means that management research can rarely divorce itself from political and ethical considerations; it also means that specific methods have to be adapted to meet the constraints of managerial agendas (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, & Lowe, 2002). Thus, for example, it is rarely possible to adopt the emergent or THEORETICAL SAMPLING strategies recommended by the proponents of GROUNDED THEORY because managers may insist on prior negotiation of interview schedules and will severely restrict access due to the opportunity costs of having researchers taking up the time of employees. Hence, the canons of grounded theory have to be adapted in most cases (Locke, 2000).

Third, the practice of management requires both thought and action. Not only do most managers feel that research should lead to practical consequence, but they are also quite capable of taking action themselves in the light of research results. Thus, research methods either need to incorporate with them the potential for taking actions, or they need to take account of the practical consequences that may ensue with or without the guidance of the researcher. At the extreme, this has led to a separation between pure researchers who try to remain detached from their objects of study and ACTION RESEARCHERS or consultants who create change to learn from the experiences. This has also led to the development of a range of methods such as participative inquiry (Reason&Bradbury, 2000) and Mode 2 research (Huff, 2000), which have considerable potential for research into management.

Of course, these three features are widely encountered across the social sciences, but it is their simultaneous combination that is driving the methodological adaptations and creativity encountered in some management research. In some cases, this has resulted in the adaptation and stretching of existing methods; in other cases, it is leading to the evolution of new methods and procedures. Furthermore, these evolving methods are likely to have a greater impact on the social sciences in general due to the sheer scale of the academic community in the field of management and business. At the time of this writing, roughly one third of all social scientists in the United Kingdom work within business schools. No doubt things have progressed even further in the United States.

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