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numbers and postmodernism**

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Disconnections in management theory and practice: Poetry, numbers and postmodernism

Dr Andy Adcroft and Dr Spinder Dhaliwal

This essay is concerned with what Abbinnett¹ described as fundamental to the discourses of social science: Truth and its construction. The central problem definition around which the narrative is built is that there is a growing disconnection in one area of social science, management research, between how truth is frequently defined and used and the approaches taken to constructing that truth. The result of this is an intellectual impurity whereby management research occupies an incoherent intellectual space somewhere between modernism and postmodernism. Our argument is that, for a host of probable reasons, management research in many areas is dominated by the search for rational and scientific truth through the use of quantitative methodologies underpinned by a positivist philosophy and the result of this is frequently truth diluted rather than truth distilled. The essay is organised in a pretty straightforward manner and discusses different routes to establishing a type of truth, the location of management research within a modern-postmodern continuum and the implications of this for management researchers. We begin, however, with a brief discussion of the nature of truth in social science.

What is truth, is truth unchanging law? If so, then there is an absolute quality to truth: Truth is simply what something is rather than what something could mean. The grass is green, the sky is blue. Davidson² loosely defines this as a correspondence theory of truth where something is true if it corresponds to a fact, a fact that is demonstrable through empirical means and is, to a degree, beyond contradiction. This is a truth built on solid foundations and not a conjecture built on what the critic, Tom Paulin, described as “*mud and wrath*”³. On the other hand, literary criticism might suggest that truth is built around the discovery of what something means through a process involving description, analysis, evaluation and interpretation. *We both have truths, are mine the same as yours?* This could be viewed as a coherence theory of truth whereby what matters is the consistency and self-supporting nature of a system of beliefs regardless of whether that system is contradicted by other systems⁴. These opposing views of truth matter because, as outcomes, they can influence or even determine the process through which they are constructed. To examine this issue further, we can set up a dichotomy in management research between the poet and the census taker.

In discussing the nature of truth in social science, Abbinnett suggests that the origins of the debate about the nature of truth lies with Hegel’s ‘The Philosophy of Right’ published almost 200 years ago⁵. In this, Hegel suggests that “*what is rational is actual and what is actual is rational*” whereby all phenomena can and should be explained through cold, hard, calculated and objective means. For Hegel, truth was an absolute concept and the search for it the ultimate quest of the philosopher; truth is

¹ Ross Abbinnett *Truth and Social Science* London, Sage Publications 1998

² Donald Davidson ‘The Structure and Content of Truth’ *The Journal of Philosophy* 87 no 6 (June 1990) pp 279-328

³ Tom Paulin *A State of Justice* London, Faber and Faber 1977

⁴ Scott Soames ‘What is a Theory of Truth?’ *The Journal of Philosophy* 81 no 8 (August 1984) pp 411-429

⁵ Ross Abbinnett *Truth and Social Science* London, Sage Publications 1998

what is right in terms of both its degree of correctness and ethical clarity. Post Hegel, Abbinnett argues, this perspective has been open to revision and criticism as social science has developed and most of this has centred on the extent to which truth is absolute and can be reached through scientific enquiry. We can develop this point by considering an example and in this case our example is the weather. In Hegelian enquiry, the weather is a pretty clear phenomenon and is therefore perfect for scientific enquiry. The result of this is weather forecasting and reporting which focuses on the hard facts about how hot or cold it is, how deep the snow may be or how much rain has fallen. However, the absolute nature of the weather becomes open to discussion if we consider an alternative form of reporting which focuses not on what the weather is but rather on what the weather may mean at a more emotional level. Ted Hughes in 'Wind', for example, talks about the weather denting eyeballs and offers an account whereby "*the wind flung a magpie away and black-back gull bent like an iron bar slowly*"⁶. This creates a problem about the nature of truth because both the meteorological and poetic explanations are inherently accurate even though they are the results of very different forms of enquiry. In this case the same thing is explained in two different ways and that difference can be partially attributed to the difference in *a priori* assumptions which underpinned the process of enquiry in the first place. These differences in assumptions can be identified through what is valuable to the enquirer. For the rational scientist and census taker, the breaking down of the phenomenon into variables is what matters and for the poet the value is in eliciting an emotional response through the careful use of words to report those variables. We can develop this contrast between statistical/evidential truth and poetic/emotional truth further with its most famous example from the First World War.

We start with the census. War is the ideal vehicle for statistical enquiry because its process and effect can be measured in an almost unlimited number of ways and both process and effect can be easily deconstructed from the whole. For example, in 1913 prices, the US Department of War estimated that the war had cost \$82.5 billion overall and much of this cost was on the 61 million combatants around two-thirds of which came from the 24 nations which declared war on the 4 central powers. Between 1914 and 1918 over 8 million combatants were killed and 7 million were maimed for life. The Germans suffered most deaths with 1.8 million and 1,114,804 British and Commonwealth soldiers were killed of which 52.47% were identified and given a named grave. During the most famous battle of the war, at the Somme in 1916, 43 divisions were involved and, on the first day, 58,000 British soldiers were killed or wounded for 68 yards of territory gained. During the First World War, 8,239 tanks were used, 2,600 ships were sunk and 56,000 mines were laid in the North Sea. Two officers from the Allied General Staff were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize⁷.

There are a number of problems with this statistical approach, none of which are methodological as the numbers are accurate and, in that sense, truthful. The first problem is that it can be easy for the statistics to become meaningless to the reader who can easily get lost in a blizzard of numbers. In any case, some of the numbers are so large as to defy comprehension. Problems are also created by the selectivity of the statistics which can, sometimes deliberately, make understanding difficult. In many

⁶ Ted Hughes New Selected Poems London, Faber and Faber 1995

⁷ John Keegan The First World War London, Vintage 2000

cases there are more statistics left out than are ever included. In the example above, whilst all the statistics are correct, there are no points of comparison and so the statistics lack any real context. In addition some of the statistics on, say, the logistics of war are unintelligible to anyone not from a specialised audience. In the context of this essay, however, the main problem with this statistical truth is in what it does not say; it misses more than it reports. Stalin suggested that whilst a single death is a tragedy, *“a million is a statistic”* as the human element is objectively screened out. Luckily, and in some ways, uniquely, poetry has been able to reinsert that human element into our understanding of the war. For example, both statistics and poetry deal with the issue of scale. In his ‘Anthem for a Doomed Youth’ Wilfred Owen avoids the use of numbers and, instead, uses metaphor to describe the scale of the war; *“What passing bells for these who die as cattle”* which neatly reflects an attitude as well as numbers could. Similarly, the statistics fail to reflect the individual experiences of the war; deconstruction can only go so far and the raw emotion of the soldier in the trenches cannot be numerically reflected. This is especially the case in discussion of the impact of the war on those who fought it. Wilfred Gibson’s poem, ‘Back’, explains these changes without recourse to psychometric therapy by comparing the man who went and *“killed men in foreign lands”* with the man who returned where the only similarity is that *“he bore my name”*⁸.

To a degree, this discussion focuses not on the nature of truth but rather on possible processes through which truth is constructed. In order to move the narrative on, we now need to shift from process to the outcome of research and our first step in doing this is to consider the intellectual space now occupied by management research. Our argument is that it occupies an incoherent intellectual space located somewhere between modernism and postmodernism. Any discussion of the nature of modernism and post-modernism is hindered by two problems; the first problem is the lack of clear definitions of the concepts, post-modernism in particular, and the second problem is the lack of clarity in when these periods end and begin. In terms of definition, the lack of a universally accepted explanation of post-modernism is illustrated by Gellner’s point that *“it is not altogether clear what the devil it is”* as *“clarity is not conspicuous amongst its marked attributes”*.⁹ Similarly, the temporal nature of the concepts is also difficult to analyse because all we can be sure about is that modernity is what preceded post-modernity. If when it happened is problematic, then its durability is also questionable; for example, Scott Lash suggested a decade and half ago that *“post-modernism is patently no longer trendy”*¹⁰ only for Gellner two years later to suggest that it is *“strong and fashionable”*.¹¹ Despite this, we would suggest that this modern-postmodern distinction serves two useful purposes in this essay. First, it provides an analytical device through which we can engage with the purpose of management research and, second, through the use of systems analysis we can discuss the process of management research.

From the perspective of literary criticism, Hassan differentiates modernism and postmodernism in order to review the meaning of texts. In order to do this, he makes a number of clear differentiations, examples of which are contained in the table

⁸ Candace Ward World War One British Poets London, Dover Thrift Editions 1990

⁹ Ernest Gellner Postmodernism, Reason and Religion London, Routledge

¹⁰ Scott Lash Sociology of Postmodernism London, Routledge 1990

¹¹ Ernest Gellner Postmodernism, Reason and Religion London, Routledge.

below.¹² Hassan’s point is that modernism privileges knowledge as an output for its own sake whereas postmodernism sees knowledge as having a unique purpose for the individual who wishes to utilise it. For the modernist, therefore, knowledge belongs to an intellectual elite but, from a postmodernist perspective where all individual interpretations have equal value, knowledge becomes a commodity for everyone. How, though, can we use this analytic device to better understand the purpose of management research?

Key Characteristics of Modernism and Postmodernism

Modernism	Postmodernism
Intrinsic	Extrinsic
Design	Chance
Hierarchy	Anarchy
Hypotactic	Paratactic
Totalization	Deconstruction
Presence	Absence
Root/Depth	Rhizome/Surface
Synthesis	Antithesis
Elitism	Anti-Authoritarianism

Source: Hassan¹³

If we consider the objective or purpose of management research from a perspective characterised as humanist, the purpose is to generate knowledge. For example, Ayer¹⁴ suggested that humanists are “*the intellectual heirs of 19th century free thinkers*” and, two and half centuries earlier, Edward Gibbon attributed the revival of “*the knowledge of the ancients*” to such a perspective and motivation¹⁵. In this framework, the humanist would seem to be a modernist, in many cases long before modernism was created. Many of the philosophical underpinnings of humanism in education and research can be traced back to the mid-18th century and the works of Rousseau who suggested that the “*highest accomplishment*” was in the training of “*mankind to be men*”; the difference between man and beast is in the former’s thirst for knowledge.¹⁶ We would argue that these historical principles, whilst being interesting, are also important because they have contemporary value. For example, the work of educationalist Paulo Friere can be traced back along the same road; Friere argues that education is “*the practice of freedom*” and is the means through which people “*deal critically and creatively with reality*”¹⁷.

So are management researchers the heirs to Rousseau, Gibbon and Friere? At his inaugural lecture at the University of Jena in 1789, the German playwright and historian Freidrich von Schiller suggested that there were two types of academic. On

¹² Ihab Hassan *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Towards a postmodern literature* Wisconsin, University of Wisconsin Press 1982

¹³ Ihab Hassan *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Towards a postmodern literature* Wisconsin, University of Wisconsin Press 1982

¹⁴ Alfred Ayer *The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge* London, MacMillan 1968

¹⁵ Edward Gibbon *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* London Chatto and Windus 1954

¹⁶ Jean-Jacques Rousseau *Allegories of Reading* USA, Yale University Press 1982

¹⁷ Paulo Friere *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving pedagogy of the oppressed* New York, Continuum 1995

the one hand there were the true intellectuals who possessed what he called “*philosophical minds*” whose purpose was to generate new ideas and discoveries. On the other hand, Schiller argued, were career academics who were “*bread-learned*”. This group were afraid of new ideas and detested the notion of intellectual revolution because it would damage their position. An interesting question is about the extent to which this kind of division between academics still exists. Hakala and Ylijoki suggest that the latter of Schiller’s academics is alive, well and thriving in universities the world over¹⁸. They point out that “*traditional academic research is giving way to new forms of knowledge production*” and that a “*purely basic research orientation is being replaced by working with problem-orientated applications*”. Nowhere is this shift more bold and stark than in university business and management schools. For example, Pfeffer and Fong suggest that unless business and management schools shift further away from traditional academic models their future will be fatally compromised; the problem of these schools is a loss of “*relevance*” because they have adopted “*the ways of other academic social science departments*”¹⁹. For Starkey and Tempest this is problematic because business and management schools are not like other university departments. During the 1990s they shifted from “*academic respectability into the domain of professional development*” which means they must become “*less introverted*” through the development of “*a new knowledge production process*”²⁰. Thus we see a significant shift from the language of academia into the vocabulary of the factory which reflects a change in mindset which must, logic dictates, have had an effect on the process of research.

In returning to this theme of process, again modernism and postmodernism can offer interesting and useful insights. Hancock and Tyler suggest that one of the main contrasts between modernism and post-modernism is how they view and treat systems²¹. Modernism has a specific focus on systems where the emphasis is placed on the discovery of underlying meaning and coherence whereas post-modernism, whilst still having a system focus, suggests that they are inherently unstable as they will always contain contradictions. From this central assumption we can further develop a number of key characteristics of the ideas. For example, in modernism, the route to meaning and truth is science because scientific methods can be used to interrogate and understand all institutions and practices. Systems are understood because science is the glue which binds together, for example, the technical, the aesthetic and the ethical. Moral ambiguity is not an issue for the modernist; morality is derived from the truth which is scientific and, therefore, correct. Thus in modernity, knowledge has a value in and of itself, knowledge for the sake of knowledge. There are two points of difference between all this and post-modernism which are crucial for the purposes of this essay. First, fragmentation and deconstruction are not sources of lament for the post-modernist because unity, coherence and meaning are not necessarily going to be present no matter how hard one looks. Second, knowledge is different in a fragmented world: Knowledge is valuable because of its functionality.

¹⁸ J Hakala and O Ylijoki ‘Research for Whom? Research orientations in three academic cultures’ *Organisation* 8 no 2 (2001)

¹⁹ J Pfeffer and C Fong (2002) ‘The end of business schools? Less success than meets the eye’ *Academy of Management Learning and Education* 1 (2002)

²⁰ K Starkey and S Tempest ‘The future of the business school: knowledge challenges and opportunities’ *Human Relations* 58, no 1 (2004)

²¹ Philip Hancock and Melissa Tyler *Work, Postmodernism and Organization* London, Sage 2001

The key question is not “*what do I know?*” but rather “*how can I use what I know?*”. The value of knowledge is in its utility.

How research is carried out will be dependent on two issues. First is the underlying philosophy of the research and the extent to which it is humanist/modernist in character or utilitarian/post-modernist. The second determinant of research process is the objective behind the research and here we would make the distinction between research as a vehicle for discovery and research as a vehicle for proof. Most management research contains two elements, theory and context. Theory denotes the fundamental concept or concepts at the heart of the work and context denotes the arena in which those concepts are going to be analysed and tested. When we talk about research as discovery we are talking about research which focuses at the conceptual level and is centred on the generation of, for example, new theories or explanations of the world. Research which focuses on proof is research at the contextual level and is about establishing whether or not some kind of accepted wisdom holds true in a previously unconsidered context. This differentiation gives us two key activities which may be present in any piece of management research: Creation and Acceptance/Validation. Creation is about discovery and that spark of inspiration which offers something not only new but also significantly different. The activity of acceptance/validation is about trying to find out if theories and concepts have any value and their degree of applicability in different contexts. The difference, therefore, between discovery and proof is determined by the point at which the researcher joins in the process. As we have discussed earlier, management research sees itself as being different to other forms of academic research because it is seen as having currency outside of academia; its purpose could be seen as to both reflect and inform the practice of management. This means that there are two further activities in the process of research. First, there is dissemination and the transfer of knowledge to a non-academic audience and, second, there is adoption which is where the research moves from simply reflecting to actually informing practice.

In relating this process to the discussion which has preceded it, we note two key issues which combine to create our problem definition. The first issue is the post-modern preference for deconstruction. We would argue that many human phenomena are not made up of discreet elements but rather are constituted of the blurring and overlapping of different elements; if a piece of music is deconstructed into its individual components, its notes, then its meaning and value is lost, so too with many of the phenomena investigated by management research. The second issue is in the growing modernist obsession with scientific methods and the search for rational and absolute truth. From both of these perspectives, management research manages to be both too modern and too post-modern at the same time. The main manifestation of this has been in the growing dominance of quantitative statistical based research across most management disciplines which creates a whole series of different problems and issues. First, management research has lost much of its creativity because the use of such approaches is usually about validation and acceptance. In illustrating this point we can ask the provocative question of why, when entrepreneurship as an activity is so interesting and dynamic, is research on the subject so dull? In a recent editorial in the *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behaviour and Research*²² which reviewed 10 years of academic research in the area,

²² *International Journal of Entrepreneurship Behaviour and Research* December 2005

the main recommendations for the future were all about research methodology and how it can be made more scientific and rigorous. The irony is in this recommendation that an activity characterised by its innovation, creativity and instinct should be investigated in the most structured, regulated and methodologically pure manner possible. More systematic evidence has been provided by Adcroft and Willis in the field of strategy research. In a 5 year study which examined almost 4000 articles from 23 journals, nearly 1 in 5 articles from the highest ranked strategy journals were written from a positivist philosophical underpinning where the emphasis was on quantitative methodologies²³.

We would suggest that there are three main lessons for management research from the arguments in this paper. First, if management research is about a search for truth then important principles can be developed about how truth can be established and discovered. Second, the diminished creativity which characterises management research can be addressed through a quasi-poetic shift from research as proof to research as an act of discovery. Finally, in opening up management research to a wider constituency and thus promoting dissemination and adoption, poetry provides important lessons about communication and accessibility. In drawing these lessons, we recognise that we are making bold claims about the value of poetry to research without going through any kind of process of validation. Therefore, we would temper and qualify those claims in two ways. First, we are not suggesting that management research should become more poetic and that the gathering of evidence, for example, should give way to a focus on metre and caesura. We are not, therefore, recommending the adoption of poetic practice but are suggesting that a consideration of poetic principles will have value. Our second point of qualification is that none of this is a real solution to the modern-post-modern dilemma of management research. However, we would make the point that these types of principle can serve to alleviate some of the tension by providing a means through which *science* and *meaning* can be brought closer together. We now turn to discuss the principle lessons in more detail.

The modernist credentials of management research suggests that only route to truth is science and that the only real truth is scientific and rational. In comparing this approach with that of poetry we are not suggesting that one is better than the other, that an emotional and personal truth is more valuable or correct than a validated and generalisable point of theory. Instead we make the basic point that the two approaches should be viewed as complimentary rather than competitive as truth frequently comes in many guises. Whether research is a scholarly modernist activity or a more utilitarian post-modern activity, the search for multiple and deeper truths through eclectic and varied means would seem to have value. This post-modern idea of the utility of knowledge can, however, serve to stifle creativity for a number of reasons. For example, the researcher whose work is viewed in the context of a factory or within a framework of assessment, is inevitably more likely to adopt statistical proof as an approach because it is, in some way or other, safe and likely to conform to the methodological predispositions of academic journals. Similarly, if research is to have use outside of academia, then the questions most likely to be asked are “*how do you know?*” or “*how can this be believed?*”. The problem occurs when research focuses on proving and re-proving that we know to be already true. In ‘The Thought

²³ Andy Adcroft and Robert Willis ‘A snapshot of strategy research 2002-2006’ Journal of Management History 14 no 4 (2008)

Fox', Ted Hughes talks about writing poetry as an almost natural process where instinct plays a central role²⁴. If genius and creativity are large parts perspiration and hard work and only small parts inspiration, then poetry can serve to reintroduce that spark of instinct. It has long been a truism that effective communication is not about what is spoken or written but is rather about what is heard and read. Research built on statistically pure methodological approaches can be hard to communicate because not everyone can understand the numbers. When only a few can provide meaning from data, the likely outcome will be scepticism and cynicism and an unwillingness to believe something that is explained but not understood. Poetry is different for a number of reasons. For example, at its best poetry can inspire and motivate in ways that numbers rarely can. Maybe more importantly, poetry as a form of communication is democratic and can be both understood and participated in by almost anyone who can wield a pen. Poetry, therefore, appeals to more than the poetic community and can be understood and interpreted by more than just those who write it.

Complex phenomena defy simple, easy and one dimensional explanations. Management is about interactions between individuals, groups, organisations and environments and management research strives to explain and inform these interactions. There is, therefore, much more to all this than simply a methodological preference. A choice of methodology is (implicitly or explicitly) a choice of philosophy and view of the world. When management as an activity has been made scientific, its weakness has always been in its lack of emotion and humanity. Similarly, when management has focused on the emotional and human, its weakness has been its lack of scientific rigour. Too infrequently is management research a voyage of discovery and too frequently does it set out to prove what we already know. If the activity is a blend of rational and irrational, scientific and emotional, individual and collective, it is not unreasonable to expect management research to reflect this.

²⁴ Ted Hughes New Selected Poems London, Faber and Faber 1995