

Herd mentality and Autopoiesis in B-Schools' Research: Here to Stay?

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Abstract

While the academic literature reveals that significant parts of management research generated by B-Schools has provenly been worthless for over four decades, what's surprising is that there seems to be no end in sight to this predicament, attributed mostly to 'physics envy' and the bureaucratization of B-School research. This article enriches this debate by foregrounding the aspects of herding and autopoiesis that have been rather underplayed in the literature concerning the mostly worthless B-School research.

Keywords: B-Schools; Herd mentality; Autopoiesis; Management research

Introduction

That much of management research is worthless with negligible use for practicing managers whom it is supposed to serve, is a no brainer Shapiro & Kirkman [1]. About 4 decades ago Behrman & Levin [2] asked B-Schools if they were actually doing their job. Subsequently, stalwarts like Ghoshal [3] took this a step further in claiming that besides being irrelevant, B-School research could even be harmful when taught in the classroom! None of this, however seems to have brought about any changes in over 40 years. I seek to reignite and enliven this debate in this opinion piece by combining a few of the better-known arguments on this subject with some slightly obscure ones, and also interspersing the same with a few personal examples of mine, to add some flavor.

Mostly meaningless management research-the origins revisited

There are dozens of eminent scholars who initiated and subsequently added to the debate on the 'vast wasteland' called management research, for over 3 decades. Arguably, Bennis & O'toole's [4] seminal article in the Harvard Business Review ('How business schools lost their way') is one of the better-known ones for its simple explication of the maladies plaguing B-Schools, and their associated remedies. These authors trace to the late 50's, the origins of why today's top ranked B-Schools are excessively 'research focused'-hence out of touch with the realities of real businesses. They compellingly dispel the nonsensical belief held by several B-School academics that 'business is a science', hence making them 'scientists' (like physicists!), expected to undertake 'scientific research' on all matters business! I quote these authors:

"Too focused on "scientific" research, business schools are hiring professors with limited real-world experience and graduating students who are ill equipped to wrangle with complex, unquantifiable issues in other words, the stuff of management' Bennis & O'toole [4].

Research of Nobel [5] furthers our understanding of this discussion in describing management research as being helpful though overly complex, hard to digest, and not backed by real quantitative insights from customer populations or engagements, leading to a disconnect between practitioners and academics, with the latter far removed from operational complexities and market dynamics. Concomitantly, B-Schools' research mostly holds negligible value to those working in the world of business. This is much at variance with other scientific disciplines, wherein academic research leads to directly applicable results that either inform or upgrade the practice of those disciplines. Exemplifying this situation-particularly in relation to the complexity and indigestibility evident within much of management research- is the following excerpt from an article of Pearce & Huang [6].

"For teams engaged primarily in conceptual tasks, interdependence exhibited a U-shaped relationship with team performance, whereas team self-leadership exhibited a positive, linear relationship with performance. For teams engaged primarily in behavioral tasks, we found a \cap -shaped relationship between interdependence and performance and a negative, linear relationship between team self-leadership and performance. Intrateam process mediation was found for relationships with

interdependence but not for relationships with team self-leadership”.

Most professionally qualified managers working in reputed organizations would have little time to read the above or make sense of it, with one senior manager (with an engineering degree and an MBA) whom I showed this to, describing this as ‘meaningless nonsense’ that no practicing manager would have time to read, far less understand or apply it!

Mostly meaningless management research-why this reportedly happens

Nobel [5] attributes the recalcitrance of B-School academics towards making their work practically relevant to the ‘Priority Paradox’. This concerns the minimal benefit that working on ‘relevant problems’ has on academics’ careers in terms of their ‘securing tenure’, which is more guaranteed by the number of articles they publish in peer-reviewed ‘scientific’ journals. Hence the prioritizing of the latter at the expense of ‘relevance’ to the real businesses. The majority of these ‘scientific’ articles reward novelty over applicability and are essentially written for and read by other academics mostly cocooned within universities, wherein they create and solve hypothetical problems rather than find real ones James [7]. Over time, the demands placed on B-School academics to publish (or perish) in top ranked journals strong on ‘scientific rigor’ has eventuated in the ‘institutionalization of intellectual homogeneity’ Schultz [8], particularly within American academics. The rigor vs relevance conundrum - as noted earlier - that has plagued management research for long years has been examined by several noteworthy scholars, including those such as Carton & Mouricou [9], Koskela [10] who attempted to unravel reasons for this (rigor vs relevance) disconnect through their respective studies spanning 2 decades. Koskela [10] evidences the unchanging, stable nature of this situation by citing two Harvard Business Review articles of Behrman & Levin [2], Bennis & O’Toole [4], separated by 21 years, during which ‘nothing has changed’. While bemoaning the helplessness and inertia of the scholarly community to rectify the situation, Koskela too, like others, (p6), identifies the root cause of the same as being ‘quantitatively oriented science’, and the pattern through which the irrelevance (of B-School / management research) is continually reproduced’.

The foregoing discussion -particularly the institutionalization of intellectual homogeneity Schultz [8] is further cemented by others see Magala [11]; Alvesson & Spicer [12] who enlighten us about the bureaucratization of the -already mostly meaningless-management research. These scholars opine that academics now work in professional bureaucracies marked by upward mobility through compliance with ranking systems. The number of journal articles published by a researcher and the level of the journal in which they appear is far more important than the article’s significance and relevance. This practice is reinforced by reward systems that often promote to the rank of ‘full Professors’ those with scarce achievements, sans a handful of publications in the right ‘scientific’ journals, often dealing with a narrow range of

topics. Full Professors are often known to operate in mutually supporting cliques with each citing the work of others who are part of their club, in order to increase their citation indices, which further boosts their careers. Alternatively, they also hold their guns -of positional power- to the heads of junior academics who must mandatorily cite their seniors’ work in all their articles.

Authoring papers in selected highly ranked journals is the only way new academics can secure stable jobs at good institutions, with those that fail to do so faced with various sanctions including job losses. Alvesson & Gabriel [13] claim that this bureaucratization of management research has brought in its many of bureaucracy’s dysfunctions: restrictions on imagination and creativity, predictable end products, bureaucratic writing styles, strong sub-specialization, and the over exploitation of limited “competence”. According to Alvesson & Sandberg [14], this leads to researchers feeling hemmed in by different rules and standards, that lead them to playing safe by imitating what others have done, which these authors call ‘gap-spotting’. In summary, the need to conform with the games’ rules and to fall in line with the system’s demands is almost absolute, with the outcome being the generation of more and more irrelevant management research on a fairly narrow set of done and dusted areas, and with a decrease in the diversity of ideas and thoughts that have value for real businesses.

Mostly meaningless management research’s downfall: academics’ herd behavior

Whilst the aforesaid stable, unchanging and institutionalized / bureaucratized situation -of reproducing irrelevant research- has been for the most part broadly explained by the ‘Priority Paradox’ discussed earlier, what has been somewhat downplayed in relation to this scenario is the aspect of ‘herding’, or more specifically ‘herd mentality’ that strongly characterizes B-School academics. This herd behavior / mentality and the institutionalization-bureaucratization of management research are strongly intertwined and mutually reinforcing. So what exactly is herding and how does it apply to B-School ‘scientists’?

Banerjee 1992 [15] / Economics Nobel laureate of 2019) describes herd behavior thus: ‘people will be doing what others are doing rather than using their information, even when their private information suggests doing something quite different’ (p798). Evolutionary biologist Hamilton [16] opines that groups of animals fleeing from predators reveal the nature of herd behavior, with each individual group member reducing the danger to itself by moving as close as possible to the center of the fleeing group.

The foregoing descriptions should help B-School ‘scientists’ conjure up pictures of themselves, as thousands of long-horned cattle sticking together tightly as an (academic) herd, while blindly, senselessly rushing through a narrow valley -the only way out- to get the better of the predator called institutionalized / bureaucratized research publishing. To further complete the picture- while some academic long-horns are racing ahead of the others to reach full professor status, the others are trying their

best to remain part of the herd to at least save their jobs and professional lives. Falling behind the herd or staking it out alone-as mavericks-means falling prey to the predator that calls the shots.

Why is 'herding' bad for B-School academics?

Herding is a bad thing for academia, according to Davis [17]. This, since herd behavior reduces the diversity of ideas and thought and rewards conformance with the established order, which does not augur well for either national or institutional policy making. Worse still, herding that today strongly characterizes B-School / management research, establishes the conditions under which research is produced, that logically would engender even more meaningless research. Quite interestingly, University of Amsterdam's Professor Davis in an interview seemed to attribute the global financial crisis (GFC) to academics' herd mentality that restricted their freedom to research outside the institutionalized / bureaucratized confines of the system, that rewards scientific rigor over practical relevance.

Shultz [8] corroborates this line of reasoning in stating that when the push for scientific rigor exceeds the tipping point, the balance promoted by pragmatism is lost. What then ensues, is the generation of reams of excruciatingly detailed studies of very minor issues within small scholarly communities in highly specialized areas. The intense pressure on early career academics to publish in A-journals very early in their careers prevents their engagement with industry through field studies or in-depth longitudinal data collection. What replaces this is lab studies, surveys of students, and the construction of large databases from the Web, that can be analyzed and reported from within the researchers' office cubicles, often resulting in generating big studies of little significance.

Mostly meaningless management research: a few personal experiences

The aforesaid lack of freedom to publish on areas outside of 'the system's' confines (or B-School scientists' comfort zones) is something that resonates well with some of my own recent publishing experiences, rather efforts. Having worked as a senior industry manager for a longer period of time than I have as a full time academic, I tend to gravitate towards researching topics that are of high value to industry practitioners but make little sense-as I have realized-to several B-School research gurus. One article that I had authored and submitted to a highly ranked journal (very related to the article's topic) concerned entrepreneurship within the middle east's GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) region, characterized by a unique operating environment for entrepreneurs, unlike any other. Therefore, what was clearly not doable, was my drawing from entrepreneurship literature developed and applicable mainly to the western hemisphere's context, to 'guide the research' I had undertaken in the GCC's unique context. To tide over the situation, I was constrained to go interdisciplinary, and to borrow theoretical concepts and literature from outside the

confines of entrepreneurship, to provide a robust explanation of my research topic. Despite the article being very well written and strongly substantiated with rich field data, and it's ticking all boxes required to satisfy the needs of an A journal-and its tight fit with the journal's aim and scope- the same was desk-rejected by the 'field editor'. When I later skimmed through the career profile of the latter, it clearly emerged that this 'scientist' had never engaged with industry, hence failed to see the significance and richness of my article, for those it was written to benefit.

Some months earlier I had sole-authored yet another well researched article that sought to provide an alternative explanation-and solutions-for a certain GCC nations' reportedly 'most serious HR issue'. Here too, as the HRM's extant literature had nothing to offer concerning this unique national level middle eastern phenomenon-and a rich 'area for research'- I had borrowed some very interesting theories albeit from outside the literature, directly related to my article's topic. In this case the journal to which I had submitted my article claimed to 'welcome articles with novel ideas and were interdisciplinary in nature!' Here again, despite the article being very well written and substantiated, highly interdisciplinary, and it's ticking all boxes required to satisfy the needs of an A journal, this same was rejected on clearly flimsy grounds.

Interestingly however, a common suggestion I had received from the reviewers of both the aforesaid articles (of 2 different journals), was that it was important for me to highlight at the outset: 'what conversation I was joining'. In other words, if there wasn't a pre-existing 'conversation to join', my article didn't stand a chance, and was worth nothing. New research on topics unheard of earlier (of the kind I had submitted) with interdisciplinary literature was simply not welcome, at least in the more established 'discipline specific scientific' journals. The fact that various 'conversations' that had emanated from the western hemisphere had absolutely no relevance to the middle east / GCC's business environment, was thrown out the window by the tunnel-visioned B-School research bureaucrats.

One of the two aforesaid reviewers was kind enough to point me to an article that explicitly detailed how I could overcome my article's shortcoming (i.e. not having 'joined a conversation'): Anne Sigismund Huff [18], Writing for Scholarly Publication as a contribution to scholarly conversation. *Management* 2016 /3 (Vol. 19), p. 240-247. The article undoubtedly makes very interesting reading, and I am quoting a few lines of its author that strongly resonate with a few key arguments (mainly re tunnel vision) that I extended in the earlier sections of this article:

'my clarifying moment came when I realized that I had to contribute to an established line of thinking..... understanding academic work as a conversation I wanted to join meant that my efforts made more sense to me and editors/reviewers. My attempt to contribute something new had to begin by specifying context with several project-defining publications.your contribution

has to attract an audience interested in similar problems; one that understands compatible theories and methods (p 241) I strongly believe that an independent intellectual effort has little chance for impact, even though social media is increasing the possible reach of individual efforts. It may not be easy to find what I call 'fellow travelers', but I am convinced that your effort will be more successful if amplified by compatible voices (p 245).

The foregoing experiences I have highlighted -which I am sure many other readers can identify with-are arguably a clear vindication of the strongly intertwined and mutually reinforcing herd behavior and the institutionalized-bureaucratized nature of management research undertaken by B-Schools. It is due to this malaise, that several very informative, rich, and highly industry relevant thoughts and ideas of those academics not part of the herd, mostly see the light of the day through alternative outlets including blogs, monographs, professional and popular press outlets, the social media, or unranked journal articles! Ensuring the status quo of this situation is the dismal quality of peer review relating to management research, mostly subjective and conformance-seeking, which is not the focus of this article.

On a concluding note: Mostly meaningless management research and Autopoiesis

On a note of conclusion, there's another term that serves to further clarify this article's contentions, or, to reinforce its claims re the mostly meaningless, unchanging nature of management research: Autopoiesis.

'Autopoiesis' has its origins in biology but is now widely used in organization theory. Simply put, autopoiesis is about the capacity of a system to continually maintain and reproduce itself as itself while the environment changes around its Vigneaux [19]; Thompson [20]. Thus, its self-reproduction relies exclusively on internal operations and is not dependent on the environment. In its existence and growth, it seeks reference only to itself. Sounds familiar? Systems operating upon the principle of autopoiesis are called autopoietic. Autopoietic systems produce themselves and only themselves [21-24].

Therefore, the next time you wonder why your painstakingly written research paper has been desk rejected by a top ranked 'scientific' journal' demanding the use of 'rigorous scientific methodologies' as applicable to particle physics, you don't need to think too hard or feel bad about it. It's not your fault. It's just that your paper was reviewed by some long horn autopoietic B-School scientist running mindlessly right at the front of some herd, oblivious to what's happening in the world around.

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