A reflection on theory building
and the development of management knowledge

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Abstract The process of management research involves various complexities and can sometimes
be viewed as highly time consuming. Good research can and does provide a momentum for further
research to be undertaken and this means that a researcher may have to think “outside the box” in
order to achieve new insights. A researcher may also need to adopt a rather “risky” research
strategy that encapsulates the critical theory approach, if they are to achieve something unique.
However daunting this appears, it should be appreciated that the processes of globalization and
interconnectivity allow various methodological approaches to be used vis-à-vis the collection,
analysis and interpretation of data. In order that new models, concepts and theories can be
produced, it is necessary for researchers to engage in theory building, and to try out methods such
as the grounded theory approach.

Introduction
Griseri (2002) has raised many interesting questions that management researchers
need to think through, if they are to embrace the full range of research methods
available to them. It is also correct to say that if management researchers are to
produce new insights into complex management problems, they need to think in terms
of being innovative. Furthermore, management researchers need to have the
confidence to challenge basic assumptions relating to interpreting research outcomes,
and question what constitutes appropriate research. New approaches need to be found
to research complex problems, and this means that the subject research methods, needs
to be given more prominence and dovetailed more closely into existing but independent
degree programme structures. It is vital that this is the case because management
educators need to think more carefully about teaching students to question their view
of reality and to engage in the debate relating to theory building.

The authors of this paper are aware of the risks associated with developing new
theory, but adhere to the critical theory approach which according to Griseri (2002,
p. 44) is more controversial than the empirical-analytic approach and the
historical-hermeneutic approach. Reference in this paper will be made to the
grounded theory approach and how a period of reflection, or constant reflection, can
result in further opportunities/subjects to be researched. This should, if handled
wisely, result in a prominent research culture being established. It is necessary to point
out that research students can and should be encouraged to engage in theory
development (Kerssens-van Drongelen, 2001, p. 503), but that, this needs to be handled
with care. A research methods course can encompass the paradigm debate and should
have both theoretical and practical underpinning, if that is, it is to meet a number of objectives (both programme specific and individual in orientation). A well designed research methods course will allow those who attend on a regular basis to develop their own insights into theory building and should also highlight the research methods that are available to management researchers which are not in common use. Various authors have made reference to research strategies and approaches (Bryman, 2000; Eisenhardt, 1989; Kent, 1999; Kerssens-van Drongelen, 2001; Patton, 1990; Saunders et al., 2003; Trim, 2001; Yin, 1989), and this material can be considered necessary and context specific. It also proof that attention has been paid to an important and necessary aspect of academic work.

The significance of theory building

Before progressing to explain the significance of theory building, it is important to reflect on what theory building is and why academics need to think about developing new theoretical insights (concepts, models and approaches). Milliken (2001, p. 73) has provided an insight into the paradigm debate and has stated that:

> Within the social sciences there has been a long-standing debate about the most appropriate philosophical position from which research methods should be derived.

These debates surface at in-house research seminars and at national and international conferences, and this is to be expected. One can also state that management academics would not be doing their job properly if they did not encourage such debate during research methods courses. The key, however, is to get both academics and researchers to think in terms of constructing logical arguments as opposed to allowing their prejudices to shape their counter arguments, and this requires a degree of intellectual honesty. In order to formulate constructive counter arguments, it is necessary to analyse and evaluate arguments, and to understand arguments (Garratt et al., 2000, pp. 154-7).

Attending and presenting papers at conferences, seminars and workshops, where the participants have the same mindset, is reassuring but unlikely to the result in discussions about theory building. Being able to think “outside the box” is an intellectual skill and will at times highlight the knowledge gaps of an individual. However, gaps in our knowledge do arise and prove challenging with respect to motivating us to eradicate our deficiencies and at the same time spur us to find new solutions. This implies that it is necessary to generate new insights into management theory and at the same time broaden the parameters of management development. Such challenges should be embraced because it proves that management academics are keen to develop new knowledge and communicate their findings to a wide audience.

In order to appreciate more fully what theory building involves, it is necessary to establish how knowledge has been developed through time. By placing the body of knowledge in an historical context, a number of useful conclusions can be drawn (Mercer, 2001; Milliken, 2001). One of the main factors to emerge from an historical appreciation of the development of knowledge is that students can better understand why specific research methods have been used in order to research a specific problem. It may be therefore, that in order for new concepts, models and theories to evolve, management academics need to detach themselves from the castle they inhabit and through strength of character and a certain rebellious disposition, make their thoughts
public. This may mean selecting a publication strategy that is non-mainstream and which to a certain degree places the academic at risk. If an academic is not prepared to do this, then it is likely that they will become or remain a follower and never become an inspiration to others. One of the main motivations to produce new knowledge is for an academic to stimulate individuals with a similar mindset, and in doing so ensure that they carry on the line of research that he/she has started.

Although theory building can and does result from mainstream approaches to research, rebellious behaviour has and will continue to result in new insights and theories being developed. But rebellious behaviour must be channelled in a logical form and any conflict that arises must not become personalised. What is worth mentioning, however, is that if a research student is prepared to think “outside the box” and face the consequences, the necessary safeguards must be in place. This means that the necessary supervisory support is provided as and when necessary. Kekale’s (2001) work is illuminating from the stance of a researcher having the confidence to use various research methods in a theory building context. However, one must not be over confident because the theory building process can be a long and drawn out affair, and many pitfalls need to be overcome.

One of the main issues facing academics and researchers who are keen to publish their findings in refereed journals is whether the logic of their work will be acceptable to others and does it stand a reasonable chance of being published. Getting published is one issue and being published in a high ranked mainstream management journal is another issue. But again, a period of reflection is needed. This is because the main consideration may be to have work published and a secondary objective may be to consolidate the research output. Consolidating one’s research is a natural process and may translate into a research strategy that witnesses work being published in different fields of activity.

The benefit of academic-practitioner links
Mercer (2001, pp. 656-7) has made reference to the external environment and the use of focus groups and scenario analysis, and the fact that governments can intervene in the environment. This raises the issue of how government departments and agencies can be included in management focused research and how public-private partnerships can be developed that are deemed sustainable. As regards public-private partnerships, academic researchers (possibly working with practitioners and industry experts), can develop new insights into management practice and theory. Management researchers can concentrate their efforts on current situations (as explained by Mercer and Wilter, 2002) or future situations (as explained by Rejeski and Wobig, 2002). In other words, management research must not be confined to an internal or an external setting only, but that can be approached from a different standpoint to conventional research. For example, we are at present in an era typified by networks and network oriented relationships, and this means that management researchers need to think in terms of defining and working with multiple data sets. The work of Baraldi and Bocconcelli (2001) is useful with respect to focusing attention on this issue as it raises several relevant issues relating to network oriented research. One of the most illuminating points to emerge from the network oriented approach is of course that this type of research can involve researchers in a number of countries. This has the main advantage of drawing on people with different skills and different analytical and
conceptual approaches, and can result in in-depth comparative studies being produced. Totally, this can be considered as a strength because unique solutions can be generated and furthermore, new research sub-projects can be generated. It has to be pointed out, however, that research students need to reduce the scope of what is being studied in order that the research process is manageable (Martinsuo, 2001, p. 548). This also reiterates the point that research needs to be planned and controlled. It also means that the researcher write-up their research as they progress through the research process and not after the work has been concluded. If the researcher does not write-up the research at specific intervals, there is the possibility that various elements of the research will be glossed over or indeed lost.

One of the main considerations to be considered by the researcher when embarking on theory building is to keep an open mind and if necessary put aside their prejudices. On reflection, one might argue that the term theory is used too often and is not always used in a clearly defined way. Weick (1995) has provided some insights into what a theory is and has added to the discussion by highlighting the significance of the process of theorizing. Jick (1983) has also added to the debate by suggesting that triangulation can be used in order to capture a problem and also, it provides a means for further analysis of the problem. Jick (1983) has made the case for using research methods that are embedded in different paradigms and this is logical. By having an open mind to research, the researcher should be confident enough to use the critical theory approach, and in doing so it helps to establish a more robust research culture. DiMaggio (1995) is right to suggest that academic researchers should keep in mind the fact that there are different types of theory, and this would be a useful starting point vis-à-vis a researcher planning a research strategy. We say this because knowledge is unbounded and the more one studies a particular topic or subject the more of an expanding universe unravels itself. This is a useful interpretation because it assumes that all knowledge is linked or there are threads of connection. This being the case, one can assume that academic researchers will need to spend time in discussing complex issues with academic staff from different fields in order, through discussion and argument, that the missing connections are identified. Once the missing connections have been identified, it is possible to determine the “new” parameters that result in a more appropriate definition of the research problem. It can also be argued that a research momentum will result that stimulates further research and hence new insights and new knowledge result.

Underpinning the critical theory approach, is the ability to think critically. Again, it is possible to consult the literature and draw on points of relevance. Garratt et al. (2000, p. 154) have pointed out that there are four broad skills that are of relevance with respect to effective thinking, they are: the ability to analyse and evaluate arguments; the ability to make judgements; the ability to retrieve information; and the ability to experiment. Although, Garratt et al. (2000) draws on what is of relevance to professional chemists, we would suggest that the context is highly relevant to researchers from a variety of disciplines. Indeed, the thinking is sound because management researchers need to develop a logical approach to their work and chemists by definition work in a logical manner. The advantages emanating from the work of Garratt et al. (2000, p. 154) is that they talk specifically in terms of researchers being able to understand and construct arguments; and think in terms of critical reading and listening and where appropriate, critical viewing. This suggests that those charged
with studying management issues and problems need to think more widely. For example, Ram (1996) has provided a useful insight into how the ethnographic method can be used to get inside management practices and this can be placed within a specific cultural context. The more that one thinks through the ramifications of this type of research, the more it becomes necessary to revisit the work of Hofstede (1997).

By reflecting on what Baraldi and Bocconcelli (2001) are purporting, it seems necessary to redefine what we mean by good research. This issue has in fact been addressed by Peters and Howard (2001) who have provided an appreciation of what good research is. A significant point to emerge from the work of Peters and Howard (2001) is that the debate which rages relating to how good research can be defined, is open to further debate, and the debate should involve a variety of stakeholders. The stakeholders can be defined as academics, researchers, practitioners, government personnel, industry experts and observers. In other words, there are a number of castles that are in being and some of the stakeholders inhabit more than one castle. Hence, it is important to establish how new management research approaches can be promoted; and how new management research approaches can be embraced with enthusiasm.

The development of knowledge
One can reflect on the richness of the management literature and say that we need to think in terms of how knowledge is produced (Partington, 2000; Pettigrew, 2001) and this may mean redefining what knowledge is. Segundo (2002, pp. 241-44) has provided help with respect to providing a new concept of knowledge and this is to be applauded. One can also suggest that Starkey and Madan (2001, pp. S13-S14) have highlighted the future of knowledge development (or a significant portion of it) when they talk about knowledge networks. Academic researchers have no choice, but to think in terms of the way in which a university can form partnership arrangements with industry and thus develop more rapidly, practitioner type theories that can be reinterpreted from an academic standpoint. This does mean however that the researcher is required to be systematic and careful (Stenbacka, 2001, p. 553), and pay constant attention to detail.

Another issue that arises is that maybe it is time to redefine the term management or at least, adopt a more diverse and embracing view of what management encapsulates. Tsoukas (1994, p. 290) has indicated that there are a range of management models in being and that there is a need to develop a metatheory of management. This is a valuable observation because it suggests that there are still new subject areas and approaches to be explored and developed. As managers in the public and private sectors are confronted with new and emerging problems, it is essential for management researchers to think holistically. Leat (1995, pp. 167-8) has suggested that:

Reflection has emerged as a panacea for stumbling professionals . . . In the swathe of work that advocates and describes the process of reflection, little is said about action. There is an explicated assumption that reflection leads naturally to new ideas and in turn to action.
This is not necessarily a natural progression for some people. If moving from new theory (abstract conceptualization) to action is represented as a problem, then students who are trying to cross this divide may be represented as engaged in problem solving.
Grounded theory and the critical friendship group method

There are many issues contained in Leat’s (1995) understanding and interpretation. What can be said, is that the grounded theory approach can be used to provide new knowledge and out of the research findings come a renewed emphasis on explaining a multitude of factors that need further elaboration. Indeed, the grounded theory approach is intellectually challenging and relevant to management researchers. The grounded theory approach forces the researcher to think in both analytical and conceptual ways, and can be used by management academics as a basis for teaching new ways to interpret and evaluate the existing management theory. It is also, an established way in which developing theory can be produced and at the same time allows those using the grounded theory approach to appraise more effectively, alternative research methods.

It is useful to reflect on what Golby and Appleby (1995, pp. 149-50) have had to say on the subject of reflective practice:

Professions are characterised by the sophistication of their practitioners’ knowledge, understanding and skills in the service of important social ideas….Research means systematic inquiry into both means and ends and takes a great variety of forms. It is, therefore, related to practice in many different ways. Reflective practice is a particularly intimate mode of research aimed at improving practice through systematic critical enquiry … The use of a critical professional community is widely seen as a vehicle for reflective professional development … We also see critical friendship as a potential strategy for enhancing research.

The critical friendship group method is used by individual researchers to receive constructive feedback relating to potential research ideas/proposals and as a means for testing a potential research strategy. The critical friendship group method can also be used by academics to explore the grounded theory approach and to assist research students to think “outside the box”. Strauss and Corbin (1990) have explained how a grounded theory can be produced, and it should be remembered that a grounded theory can take one of the several forms. Possibly the most common way in which a grounded theory is produced is in the form of a narrative. However, the researcher needs to think carefully about the way in which a grounded theory is represented as this may decide how the research findings are received and acted upon. It is also worthwhile reflecting on the words of Partington (2000, p. 93) who has stated:

The approach to discovering theory from data known as grounded theory is much-cited, but little understood.

Conclusion

It is hoped that this paper will encourage further debate about theory building in a management context and furthermore encourage more researchers to have the confidence to undertake the grounded theory approach. But close academic supervision is required, because Partington (2000, p. 95) is right to point out that some “doctoral students working in the field of organization and management who have attempted to follow the Strauss and Corbin approach … have abandoned it because of its bewildering complexity”.

What the reader needs to keep in mind, however, is that we can no longer assume that the models, concepts and theories that we have worked with in the past, will in fact
provide the answers that we expect them to in the future. This may be because the parameters have changed or new ways of thinking have established themselves. This is not to say that the models, concepts and theories do not have relevance, but one does need to state that the processes of globalization and interconnectivity have resulted in different forms of communication, decision making and managing. There are now, new ways to obtain data and information, and different tools for analyzing and interpreting data that can greatly assist the researcher. This suggests that researchers can be more ambitious with respect to studying complex management situations, but also, academics need to ensure that researchers are confident enough to experiment with different methodological approaches, if that is new knowledge is to be produced.

References


