Research Methods and Research Practice: History, Themes and Topics*

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Research methods and research practice provide relatively new foci for academic reflection and enquiry in the business and management field. There has been an increase in the number of forums and range of debates in the area. This paper provides a historical and thematic overview of the field as a means of contextualizing the other papers in the remainder of this special issue. Each paper covers one of a broad spectrum of issues about research methods and research practice: namely, measurement in quantitative research; theory development in qualitative research; visual methods; evaluation of concepts; issues experienced when researching extreme events; paradigm wars; and the changing pattern of coverage of qualitative research papers in leading journals.

Introduction

Knowledge of research methods and research practice is probably as old as academic research itself. However, it is questionable whether a special themed issue on research methods and research practice in a review journal would have been possible in the management disciplines two or three decades ago. This is not simply because business and management schools are relatively recent developments in the history of academe (Morris 2011). It is also because the development of research methods and research practice as specific foci for reflection and consideration is relatively new; so much so that there is still considerable disagreement on what constitutes the field. While a review of standard texts may reveal a consensus that research methods are the procedures and techniques used to compile systematic observations and to make sense of those observations in the generation and examination of ideas and theories (Bryman and Bell 2011; Easterby-Smith *et al.* 2012;

Ghauri and Gronhaug 2010; Saunders *et al.* 2012), definitions of research practice are more contested. One view of research practice is that it is the proper execution of research. For example, Evans (2010, p. 2) states:

> To be identified as academic research, the practice must be integrated within a strategy that is *purposive* (based on the identification of an issue or problem worthy and capable of investigation), *inquisitive* (seeking to acquire new knowledge), *informed* (conducted from an awareness of previous, related research), *methodical* (planned and carried out in a disciplined manner), and *communicable* (generating and reporting results which are testable and accessible by others).

Such a definition is potentially problematic, as it tends to reify the knowledge-seeking dimensions of research and conceal the actions executed in the conduct of research and any influences on those actions. An alternative definition is provided by Stablein and Frost (2002, p. 2; see also, Guthrie 2007) who suggest viewing research practice as the journey that people undertake as they 'live the research life'. While recognizing the merits of viewing research practice as a journey, there is a

danger of personalizing research practice to a degree that is not necessarily helpful if the potential factors affecting research projects are to be theorized successfully. The definition that is assumed here is that research practice involves the conduct of research under the various influences and constraints that arise from: the values, intellectual predilections and choice of methods of the researchers; and the environment in which the individual researchers or research teams work, including funding regimes, forms of ethical regulation and criteria for measurement of their work.

The objectives for this special issue on 'Research Methods and Research Practice' were to assess the hitherto development of debates on research methods and research practice and to help identify agendas for the future. The call for papers stated a desire to 'put together a diverse set of papers which develop and stimulate new thinking about management research methodologies and their potential opportunities and constraints when practiced in this changing context'. The call brought forward nineteen submissions of which seven are included here. The purposes of this introductory paper are to provide a historical overview by which to locate the papers in the current issue, to introduce the other papers and to consider some of their implications for the future of research methods and practice in the business and management field. The remainder of the discussion is organized into three broad sections. The first section provides an outline of the development of forums for discussion of research methods and research practice, particularly in the business and management fields. The second section provides a schematic review of the literature on research methods and research practice to date – including an outline of the contents of three journals identified in the first section – to help locate the contents of the papers in this issue. The following section reviews the papers in the special issue and considers some of their implications for the future of research methods and research practice.

Development of forums for debates on research methods and practice

Table 1 summarizes major developments in journals across the social sciences and in conference tracks and aligned groups dedicated to the discussion of research methods and practice in the management area. Although the list is not exhaustive, it indicates

that there has been development of relevant journals in social sciences from the 1970s with a marked increase in the number of those journals since the 1990s, helping to provide a general outlet for people in the management disciplines interested in writing about research methods and research practice. From the late 1980s onwards, the Research Methods (RM) division of the American Academy of Management (AoM) has existed to provide a forum at which management academics could expose papers to critical scrutiny before submission to journals for publication. Eventually, this helped to give rise to a 'zeitgeist in the management discipline [that] was finally conducive to a stand-alone methods journal' (Aguinis *et al.* 2009, p. 70) when *Organizational Research Methods* (*ORM*) was established in 1998, growing out of a special section in the *Journal of Management* with sponsorship from the RM division of AoM. As will be seen below, this journal favoured quantitative over qualitative methods and debates about method over research practice.

Since the turn of the century, there has been an increase in the number of specialist research methods journals in the social sciences, including *Ethnography*, *Action Research*, *Journal of Research Practice*, *Journal of Mixed Methods* and *Survey Research Methods*. There has also been a range of developments in the business and management field in particular. For the purpose of this discussion, the focus is on the general field of management so the constituent disciplines such as marketing or strategy are not considered. Conference tracks dedicated to the discussion of research methods and research practice have been established and run continually at the annual conferences of the British Academy of Management (BAM) from 2004 and the European Academy of Management (EURAM) from 2008 and, more intermittently, at the Australian and New Zealand Academy of Management (ANZAM) annual conference. These developments have been supported by the establishment of special or strategic interest groups focused on research methods in BAM in 2005, in EURAM in 2010 and in ANZAM in 2011. There has also been the establishment of research methods journals in the management area, including the *E-journal of Business Research Methods* in 2003, *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management* in 2006 and the *Journal of Organizational Ethnography* in 2012. As a number of their names suggest, their focus is on methods and approaches not usually found in *ORM*. Unfortunately, it often takes some time for new journals to

Table 1. *Start date of tracks, divisions, special or strategic interest groups of academies, additional conferences and general social science and management methodology journals*

Event	Start year
Development of forums within business and management	
Research Methods Division of the American Academy of Management	1988
Research Methodology Track of the British Academy of Management	2004
Research Methodology Special Interest Group of British Academy of Management	2005
Research Methods and Research Practice Track of European Academy of Management	2008
Research Methods and Research Practice Strategic Interest Group of European Academy of Management	2010
Mixed Methods special interest group of the Australia and New Zealand Academy of Management	2011
Aligned conferences	
European Conference on Research Methodology for Business and Management Studies	2002
Qualitative Inquiry, Illinois	2005
Ethnography Conference	2006
Journals	
General social science methodology journals	
Journal of Contemporary Ethnography	1972
Qualitative Inquiry	1995
International Journal of Social Research Methodology	1998
Ethnography	2000
International Journal of Qualitative Methods	2002
Action Research	2003
Journal of Research Practice	2005
Methodology	2005
Survey Research Methods	2007
Journal of Mixed Methods Research	2007
Methodology journals in the business and management disciplines	
Organizational Research Methods	1998
E-Journal of Business Research Methods	2003
Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management	2006
'Methodology Corner' in *British Journal of Management*	2012
Journal of Organizational Ethnography	2012

obtain listings in different ranking systems to reflect their quality. This may carry an implicit danger that the research topics covered by these journals will become ghettoized. In this regard, a marked development is the introduction of 'Methodology Corner', a special section dedicated to the discussion of research issues, in the long-standing and highly ranked *British Journal of Management* (*BJM*) in 2012. Although it is too early to evaluate the impact of this development, it promises to be an important outlet for papers on research methods and research practice.

Historical development of themes in debates about research methods and practice

Academic research in the management field started long before the development of the journals and forums identified above. In the USA, such develop-

ments can be traced back to the end of the 19th century with a great expansion in the post-1945 boom; in the UK, the development commenced from the 1960s (see Morris (2011) for a more detailed account). Traditionally in the USA, management scientists drew on the approaches from economics and other social sciences, and the field was dominated by quantitative approaches. Despite this, there was also an enduring tradition of qualitative research (Locke and Golden-Biddle 2002, p. 101) including organizational ethnographies. However, after the World War II, the prevalence of a modernist scientific ethos that emphasized explanation and prediction on the basis of empirical evidence led to research being skewed. This prevalence was aided by the development of new computers and software packages for statistical analysis at well-funded business schools that had plentiful jobs for new PhDs who were possibly more attracted to the positivistic theory-testing potential offered by quantitative methods (Morris 2011, p. 37; van Maanen 1979).

Any organizational ethnographic work that took place became more influenced by logical positivism (Locke 2011).

Developments in quantitative methods continued to become increasingly sophisticated as the advance of technology and software packages enabled the analysis of complex sets of statistical data. Such advances were highlighted, particularly in psychology journals such as the *Journal of Applied Psychology* and *Personnel Psychology*. One consequence is that a number of USA-based journals in the management disciplines have been dominated by articles adopting quantitative methods (Aguinis *et al*. 2009; Podsakoff and Dalton 1987; Scandura and Williams 2000; Stone-Romero *et al*. 1995); a pattern contributed to by the PhD programmes and training environment in American academic institutions (Bluhm *et al*. 2011; Lee 2004). That is not to argue that there were no journal articles containing qualitative research published in USA-based journals (see Lee *et al*. (1999) and Bluhm *et al*. (2011) for reviews); but there appears to be less diversity in the epistemological underpinnings of that research than is found in European journals (Easterby-Smith *et al*. 2008). One possible consequence is that the skills particular to qualitative research have been conveyed primarily through books (e.g. Golden-Biddle and Locke 1997).

The methods adopted for management research in the UK at the time of the expansion of management education from the 1960s were initially an eclectic mix, reflecting the various backgrounds of the people attracted to the new business and management schools from other disciplines (Morris 2011, pp. 35–36). As numbers of staff increased, distinctive disciplines emerged within management. Some disciplines sought to emulate the quantitative and positivist traditions of their USA counterparts (Hopper *et al*. 2001); however, in others – including Accounting and Organization Studies – many researchers started to adopt new paradigms that complemented and encouraged the development of qualitative research. Examples included the post-positivist and constructionist and postmodern paradigms, all of which began to challenge the traditional foundational empirical understandings upon which management research had been based. Drawing upon the work of European philosophers such as Foucault, Derrida and Lacan, these theorists dismissed modernist assumptions of objectivity and rationality in favour of subjectivist ontologies and epistemologies, providing rich opportunities for organizational researchers to experiment with new methods, including

those that focused on the constructive qualities of talk such as discourse analysis, stories and narrative (Cooper and Burrell 1988). Illustrative examples of using these and other qualitative methods were conveyed through edited collections (e.g. Cassell and Symon 1994). Where an insufficient critical mass of researchers in the management disciplines prevented advancement, developments were realized in cognate disciplines and transferred to management, as with visual research approaches (see Bell and Davidson, this issue). Research outputs from writers working within the theoretical approaches identified above could be found in European-based journals such as *Journal of Management Studies* and *Organization Studies*.

In both the USA and Europe, there have been longstanding debates about research practice. For example, debates about the relevance of academic management knowledge that had started in the USA in the late 1950s and transferred across to the UK in the 1960s (Wensley 2011) have continued. The BAM journal, *BJM*, devoted a special issue to the problems of management research in 2001, and the debates have continued to this day (e.g. Hodgkinson and Starkey 2011, 2012; Pettigrew 2011; Willmott 2012). A more critical edge to these debates and consideration of other issues about practice grew out of the changing composition of UK business and management schools. The movement of funding away from disciplines such as sociology saw the migration of social scientists who had been influenced by a variety of European critical theorists including Marx, Gramsci and Habermas into business and management schools, which became the home of critical management studies (Hassard and Rowlinson 2011). This encouraged a critically reflexive approach to research practice, where issues of power in the changing environment have been critiqued. For example, there have been analyses of the impact that neo-liberal policies and changing funding regimes in higher education have had on academics' motivations for – and perceptions of – research.

The development of the different intellectual frameworks discussed above also gave rise to a number of debates about research practice including the relative merits of different paradigms (Shepherd and Challenger, this issue), the place of qualitative research within those paradigms (Welch, Piekkari and Plakogiannaki, this issue) and the appropriateness of different criteria for assessing work within those different paradigms (Johnson *et al*. 2006). These debates supplemented others about research

practice that were found primarily in books that provided insider accounts about the constraints and opportunities experienced in executing research projects (Bryman 1988; Humphrey and Lee 2004). More recently, there have been debates about practice that have addressed issues pertaining to research outside of Europe and North America. For example, Bruton and Lau (2008) have examined the extent to which journals publish work on developments in Asia, while White (2002) considers a range of related issues including the extent to which Asian management research relies heavily on quantitative data and the potential dangers of ignoring work not written in English.

As noted above, journals dedicated to research methods and research practice started to appear from 1998. The pattern of debate in three such journals will be reviewed here briefly. The three are: *Organizational Research Methods* (*ORM*), which is the oldest specialist research methods journals and has favoured quantitative methods since its inception (Aguinis *et al*. 2009, p. 95); *Qualitative Research in Organization and Management* (*QROM*), which is dedicated to qualitative research across the management disciplines; and *Journal of Research Practice* (*JRP*), which is the journal that is dedicated to research practice. The review has been conducted from the time of each journal's inception to the end of 2012. All articles were read to obtain an overview of the patterns of development of debates in the field of research methods and research practice. Aguinis *et al*. (2009) have already conducted a review of the first ten years of *ORM*, and they found that only 10% of articles addressed qualitative research methods, the remaining 90% of articles being addressed to quantitative methods. Notably, a good proportion of these articles appeared in a single special themed issue on general philosophical approaches consistent with interpretivism (see Prasad and Prasad 2002). This was when the majority of articles that addressed the epistemological underpinnings of the authors were considered. The vast majority of other articles appeared to assume a neutrality of research implied by positivism.

Aguinis *et al*. (2009) note some movement in the coverage of different quantitative issues, with a declining interest in simple scale development issues and increasing coverage of other issues concerned with measurement. It may be that Aguinis *et al*.'s review marginally overstates the preponderance of quantitative issues, as there was a special themed issue on ethnostatistics (see Gephert 2006) which

may be viewed as a hybrid – rather than only a quantitative – method, as statistics are explained by reference to their cultural context and questions raised as to how those statistics are used. In this sense, articles in that special issue provided some of the few challenges to positivism implicit in most other articles in *ORM*. There were also some articles on research practice. The development of the Internet gave rise to consideration of issues about research practice, including considering under what conditions e-mail surveys were better than surveys distributed by other means (Simsek and Veiga 2000) and the ethical issues of using web pages and browsers to conduct research (Stanton and Rogelberg 2001). Others discussed factors affecting the conduct of fieldwork. For examples, Brannick and Coghlan (2007) suggest that insider research can help realize comprehensive research findings, while Buchannan and Bryman (2007) report on how the choice and execution of methods are constrained by a range of organizational, historical, political, ethical, evidential and personal factors. Nevertheless, these tended to be rare incursions into consideration of research practice issues and should not detract overly from the pattern reported by Aguinis *et al*.

This general preponderance of articles on quantitative methods in *ORM* has continued since the time of Aguinis *et al*.'s review, with experiment and simulation designs, surveys, measurement, interrater agreement issues, structural equation modelling, multiple-regressions, multi-level studies and research, mediation and interaction effects in models and meta-analysis all being given coverage. Nevertheless, *ORM* has increased its coverage of qualitative research methods to include articles on case studies, interviews, photographic evidence, repertory grids, content analysis and forms of textual or narrative analysis. This changing pattern is related in part to special themed issues addressed to general qualitative approaches such as the one on ethnography (see Cunliffe 2010). Special themed issues have also provided a focus for some of the increased discussion of research practice in *ORM*. See, for examples, the discussions of what constitutes quality in qualitative research (Easterby-Smith *et al*. 2008) and the appropriateness of different compositions of editorial advisory boards (Bedeian *et al*. 2009). There were also some articles on research practice in general issues. For example, Locke and Ramarkrishna-Velamuri (2009) discuss strategies for qualitative researchers to incorporate research participant review into their research for ethical reasons. While these examples

were not wholly isolated and others about qualitative research methods and research practice did appear in *ORM*, the majority of articles remain addressed to quantitative methods.

The other journals that have emerged have helped to redress the favouring of quantitative methods by *ORM*. For example, the focus of *QROM* means that it has covered issues relating to qualitative research methods, including interviews, case studies, focus groups, diaries, shadowing, a wide range of visual methods, grounded theory, different forms of textual analysis, thematic and rhetorical analyses among others. *QROM* has also carried a good proportion of articles that discuss the merits of general philosophical approaches, including interpretivism, postmodern theorizing, different variants of feminist ideas and pragmatism. A range of issues related to research practice have also been addressed in *QROM*, including the constitutive nature of interviews in the construction of identity of the researcher, the role of emotions in the research process, stakeholders' perceptions of quality in qualitative research, the conventions of academic writing, strategies for writing ethnographies, academic–practitioner collaboration, strategies for protecting the identity of respondents in interviews and problems associated with translation of data from another language into English.

Journal of Research Practice is a multidisciplinary, electronic journal rather than being dedicated to business and management. It has carried a number of articles about practice, including the problematic issues of being bilingual when conducting international research, the factors that might influence the choice to submit a PhD on the basis of publications and the issues involved in managing relationships with practitioners or with academics from other disciplines in interdisciplinary research. *Journal of Research Practice* has also carried articles that address epistemology, qualitative research methods such as narratives, visual techniques, documents, autoethnography and grounded theory, as well as quantitative techniques such as surveys.

The picture portrayed here of the development of debates about research methods and practice in the management field is that initial developments in the USA favoured discussions of studies that used quantitative methods within a positivist framework, with qualitative studies being in a minority. There were also few articles about research practice, such as the role of management knowledge. Development of management research debates in the UK and Europe has included greater consideration of qualitative research methods from different epistemological positions. There were also more concerns with research practice and the development of critical perspectives on such issues. General management journals in the respective continents carried articles that reflected such patterns. To a large extent, the emergence of journals dedicated to discussions of research methods and research practice have seen a continuation of these patterns, although the American-based *ORM* is slowly embracing more articles about qualitative research and a wider variety of research practice issues.

The topics in the articles in this issue

As stated above, an objective of the special issue was to put together a diverse set of papers. Such diversity has been achieved with articles that address quantitative research methods, qualitative research methods, a range of methods from different epistemological positions and research practice issues. The article by Scherbaum and Meade addresses the issue of measurement in quantitative research. Scherbaum and Meade suggest that quantitative researchers have relied too heavily on a limited set of self- or other-reported rating scales that are suitable for a specific set of problems, but are not necessarily useful for issues of which people are not wholly aware. Scherbaum and Meade identify hitherto unexplored measurements for management research, namely physiological- and biological-based measurements – which have been developed in other disciplines – experience-sampling measurements and implicit measurements to address these issues. An important strength of the article that is not always evident in other articles on quantitative research is that Scherbaum and Meade give due regard to the context in which the measurements might be deployed and the problems, difficulties and ethical dilemmas of borrowing such measurements from other disciplines and applying them to management research. An important implication of Scherbaum and Meade's article is how best to construct multidisciplinary teams if this is required as a consequence of the greater regulation of using measurements borrowed from disciplines in the medical field.

The article by Klag and Langley is specifically about qualitative research. It provides a review that addresses the conceptual leap required in abductive reasoning to move from empirical data to theoretical ideas in qualitative research. This is a crucial

question of interest for qualitative researchers, though one that is rarely discussed in the literature. A novel aspect of Klag and Langley's review is in their combination of conventional methodological texts with more reflexive insider accounts to articulate four dialectic tensions – between deliberation and serendipity, social construction and self-expression, knowing and non-knowing, and engagement and detachment – to help explain how qualitative researchers are able to develop theory. An important issue raised by Klag and Langley's article is the way that text and writing of text is essential for their own development of theory. As Klag and Langley indicate, their observations have important implications for the way in which management scholars learn how to undertake and contribute to qualitative research.

The article by Bell and Davidson is significant because it addresses a new set of research methods that are becoming increasingly important in the business and management field, namely those designed to capture and make inferences from messages that are conveyed visually. Bell and Davidson's article reviews and evaluates developments in visual methods across a spectrum of epistemological approaches. An important issue arising from Bell and Davidson's article is how best to develop the mixing of methods to synchronize the information available from both linguistic and visual evidence to develop a multimedia understanding of business and management phenomena. As Bell and Davidson express it, there is a need for research that overcomes the hitherto 'binary opposition between linguistic and visual data' to demonstrate 'the affordances of different modes of communication when used in combination' in a research project. This need also has implications for how the broader academic infrastructure – such as journals – needs to adapt both to be able to include visual evidence and to evaluate its worth.

The next two articles in this special issue bridge concerns of research methods and research practice. Ravasi and Canato consider what would constitute legitimate evidence of a construct – in their work of organizational identity – and what would constitute good research on that topic. Ravasi and Canato echo the description of the more general pattern of development of epistemological positions in the management disciplines, of an initial dominance of positivism and a subsequent introduction of interpretive perspectives. A particularly valuable part of the contribution in the light of debates about what are appropriate criteria for assessing different types of research is that Ravasi and Canato provide a review

of approaches to empirical work that have been adopted in the field so far to allow an assessment of work on its own terms. In this regard, there is an overlapping issue between Ravasi and Canato's article and the following one by Buchannan and Denyer. Buchannan and Denyer address 'extreme events' and the problems of researching such phenomena as opposed to more normal events. Many journals are reluctant to publish articles that report on phenomena that might have limited generalizability – which extreme events tend to have by definition – highlighting the importance of assessing research work on its own terms. Buchannan and Denyer provide a review of the research that has been conducted on extreme events around an ideal-type of phases – of pre-crisis, event, crisis response management, investigation, organizational learning and implementation of response – in such an event. They highlight some of the practical difficulties of conducting research into extreme circumstances, including a tendency to have to rely on after-event research designs, practical and ethical problems of acquiring data in circumstances that may be both sensitive and obscure, and the difficulty of identifying the various contributory factors that led to the extreme circumstances. Finally, Buchannan and Denyer make proposals for theorizing about such events and provide guidance on how to research extreme events in the future.

The final two articles in this special issue infer different political dimensions of research practice. The article by Shepherd and Challenger addresses the question of the paradigm wars that have existed between those subscribing to different philosophical tenets in some disciplines. Using the concept of rhetoric, Shepherd and Challenger highlight how each commentator on the existence of paradigms uses similar techniques or micro-discursive strategies to establish the credibility of their own viewpoint on paradigms and to undermine the credibility of others. An important strength of Shepherd and Challenger's article is that it serves to illustrate the political nature – of pursuit for superiority over others' ideas – of all research, despite the claims of objectivity and neutrality by researchers working within some paradigms. An important question raised by Shepherd and Challenger's article is not simply how paradigmatic differences may be addressed, but whether their own analysis is simply offering an ad hoc analytic tool, a component of an existing paradigm or the basis for a new paradigm per se.

The article by Welch, Piekkari and Plakogiannaki conducts what the authors describe as a 'rhetoric of science' approach to analyse how authors explain their approach in articles based on qualitative research strategies that have been published in the USA-based *Academy of Management Journal* (*AMJ*) and the European-based *Journal of Management Studies* (*JMS*). They identify how the authors use 'stylistic, argumentative and presentational practices' that constitute the rhetoric in their articles, which gravitate towards a modernist rhetorical approach that is consistent with positivist views of a limited role for qualitative research, a revisionist rhetoric that accepts many of the assumptions of the modernist rhetoric but affords a broader role for qualitative research, or a constructivist, non-positivist rhetoric that adopts non-positivist approaches to qualitative research. Welch *et al*. found that, while there was a greater preponderance of qualitative articles based on a modernist approach in *AMJ* than was to be found in *JMS* throughout most of the period of their review (1999–2011), articles in *JMS* were increasingly gravitating towards a modernist rhetoric from 2009 onwards. The political issue that is implicit in Welch *et al*.'s analysis is how changes in editorial policy and article coverage of journals affects the people working from within the favoured and less-favoured analytical frameworks.

Concluding comments

The breadth of concerns expressed in the papers in this special issue is a testimony to how rich the debates in the field of research methods and research practice have become. As noted earlier, the journals in the field have sometimes developed in ways that favour some methods and concerns over others. The existence of highly respected journals in which all methods and concerns may be debated is essential for developments in the field. We acknowledge that there is a preponderance of papers in this special issue that are concerned with qualitative research methods and research practice and that this may be attributed to the editorial biases of the editors of this themed issue, who are qualitative researchers. However, it may be argued with equal validity that qualitative researchers know that there is a general expectation of the reflexivity and considerations of research practice that are found in the papers in this special issue.

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