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G U I D E P O S T

RESPONSIBLE RESEARCH AND RESPONSIBLE LEADERSHIP STUDIES

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Management research has been criticized for the gap between research and practice (the relevance issue) since the early 1990s. In recent years, there has been an equally important reckoning that business research suffers from low credibility and low replicability (the rigor issue). Interestingly, the literature has treated rigor and relevance as two independent issues. This Guidepost discusses the necessary interdependence of rigor and relevance, introduces the responsible research for business and management movement that strives for *both* rigor (credibility of evidence) and relevance (usefulness of the knowledge), and illustrates how the seven principles of responsible research can guide studies of responsible leadership in the global context of the twenty-first century. I end the Guidepost by calling on management researchers to demonstrate responsible leadership by engaging in responsible research to produce both credible and useful knowledge and to contribute to the common good.

For almost three decades, there has been continuous criticism on the lack of relevance in management research (Davis, 2015; Hambrick, 1994). More recently, there has been a parallel criticism that business research suffers from a credibility crisis (Bedeian, Taylor, & Miller, 2010; Honig et al., 2018). The purpose of this Guidepost is to discuss the need for a simultaneous emphasis on both rigor and relevance, because society benefits only when the research topic is relevant for society and the conclusions of the research on a highly relevant topic are valid, reliable, and replicable. I introduce the Responsible Research in Business and Management (RRBM; www.rrbm.network) movement, which strives for *both* credible (rigor) and useful (relevance) knowledge; and discuss how the seven principles of responsible research can serve as a guide in studying responsible leadership in the global context of the twenty-first century.

TWO SEPARATE PROBLEMS AND TWO SEPARATE SOLUTIONS

The literature has treated the problems of rigor and relevance as two independent issues. The open science movement (Nosek et al., 2015) represents a major effort to address the credibility crisis by promoting transparency in the research process, including preregistering hypotheses and depositing a comprehensive research plan prior to execution to remove the temptation to report the best results after project completion or to revise the hypotheses after the study results are known (Tsui, 2016). Many leading journals in management (e.g., Bettis, Ethiraj, Gambardella, Helfat, & Mitchell, 2016; Lewin et al., 2016; Meyer, Van Witteloostuijn, & Beugelsdijk, 2017) have introduced new editorial policies to combat the credibility problem. Solving this problem is important—in disciplines such as chemistry, engineering, and medicine, the application of wrongful conclusions can have life and death consequences; in business, it may lead to bad management practices, resulting in worker stress, job

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loss, environmental degradation, or millions if not billions of dollars wasted on executive compensation without the promised shareholder returns (Ghoshal, 2005).

Scholars are also eager to solve the relevance problem. For example, solutions have been discussed by Kieser, Nicolai, and Seidl (2015) for management, Toffel (2016) for operations management, Rajgopal (2020) for accounting, and Wiklund, Wright, and Zahra (2019) for entrepreneurship. Recently, management scholars have begun to consider the translational research idea in biomedicine (Cripe, Thomson, Boat, & Williams, 2005; Norman, 2010) to reduce the gap between research and practice. Translation research rests on the assumption that the research results are credible and the research problems are meaningful. This assumption is at risk in business and management research, given that it suffers from both low rigor and low relevance.

RESPONSIBLE RESEARCH—DUAL FOCUS ON BOTH RIGOR AND RELEVANCE

The RRBM movement, which focuses on both rigor and relevance, was founded in 2015 by 24 leading scholars in five core business disciplines globally (plus four leaders of associations tightly connected with business education). These 28 cofounders defined responsible research as scientific work that produces credible knowledge that is also useful for practice (Cofounders of RRBM, 2017, revised 2020). The group formulated seven principles to guide research design. The first principle, "Service to Society," is foundational. Increasing benefit to all people and avoiding negative externalities on society are universal norms of the scientific community (see, e.g., the mission statement of the American Association for the Advancement of Science; https://www.aaas.org/mission). Principles 2 to 4 aim to improve the credibility of research findings. Principle 2 is "Valuing both Basic and Applied Contributions"—that is, in-depth studies with new insights at a pretheory stage are just as valuable as hypotheses-testing studies. Principle 3, "Valuing Plurality and Multidisciplinary Collaboration," refers to accepting different research themes, methods, forms of inquiry, interdisciplinary collaboration and knowledge cocreation with practitioners. Principle 4, "Sound Methodology," applies to both quantitative and qualitative research, and both theory-generation and theory-testing studies. These three credibility-enhancing principles appreciate diversity in methods, different ontologies in different regions of the world, and different forms of epistemology. Homogenization is replaced by a plurality (Tsui, 2007) encouraging context-sensitive research (Plakoyiannaki, Wei, & Prashantham, 2019) and indigenous scholarship (Van de Ven, Meyer & Jing, 2018) to ensure that research findings are valid in both regional and global contexts of inquiry.

Principles 5 and 6 pertain to strengthening the usefulness of the research findings. Principle 5, "Stakeholder Involvement," is about engaging relevant stakeholders in the research, from defining the research questions to collecting data, interpreting the results, and checking agreement in the assumption of reality. Again, diversity in regional differences is valued in the research. Principle 6, "Impact on Stakeholders," recognizes research that has a positive impact on diverse stakeholders and values knowledge that informs better business practices, which, in turn, contributes to better societies. Principle 7, "Broad Dissemination," encourages the use of different forms of dissemination, taking advantage of Internet technology, so that research findings can reach diverse users in an easy-to-understand and timely fashion.

In total, these principles relate to the different stages of the research process. They would support the pursuit of research that is problem-focused and solution-oriented. They would enhance the potential of the research to contribute to both basic knowledge and useful ideas for application, with sensitivity to regional differences. Next, I illustrate how the seven principles can be applied to the study of responsible leadership, an idea that has been gaining increasing attention among both scholars and practitioners in response to society's needs in the contemporary (twenty-first century) global context.

INCREASING CONTEMPORARY INTEREST IN RESPONSIBLE LEADERSHIP

Leadership has been a popular topic of study since business schools first began to emerge in the early twentieth century. Early leadership theories focused on leaders' traits or behaviors, with employee work performance or commitment as outcomes of interest. In recent years, scholars have proposed several "normative" leadership models, such as servant leadership (Van Dierendonck, 2011), authentic leadership (Gardner, Cogliser, Davis, & Dickens, 2011), spiritual leadership (Fry, 2003), and ethical leadership (Brown & Treviño, 2006). Servant leadership considers followers' well-being as a priority, and organizational outcomes as a consequence of the giveback by well-served followers. Based on the premise of authentic leadership, being true to self is more important than acting in a role. The presumption is that followers respond more positively to authentic than to inauthentic leaders. Spiritual leadership emphasizes altruism, hope, faith, and work as a vocation. Ethical leadership is about demonstrating normatively appropriate conduct. Another normative theory is self-sacrificial leadership (Choi & Mai-Dalton, 1999), referring to the leader giving up or postponing the rewards that he or she is normally entitled to, or refraining from the use of power, for the benefits of employees and the company.

These normative theories reveal two assumptions. The first is respect for the intrinsic dignity of each human being, such that followers are no less important than leaders or the organization. The second is the contribution to the common good. Leaders are to contribute to creating conditions in which people can thrive, realize their potential, and enjoy a decent life. These theories might be a reaction to the instrumental foundation of past leadership theories that treated shareholder wealth as the primary responsibility of corporate leadership and positioned employees (even customers and suppliers) as instruments for corporate wealth creation. Interestingly, despite the moral ideal underlying the normative leadership theories, empirical studies have tended to focus on predicting performance rather than on employee well-being. The popular transformational leadership theory (Bass & Riggio, 2006) has the same assumption by aligning, if not subsuming, employee interests with organizational goals.

However, the world has changed, giving urgency and legitimacy to the idea of responsible leadership. Many executives have come to the realization that "a changing world demands a new leadership style emphasizing societal impact and commitment to the common good" (de Bettignies, 2014). This new realization is evident in a statement on a redefinition of "Corporate Purpose" issued by the Business Roundtable (members are CEOs of leading U.S. companies) on August 19, 2019 (https://www.businessroundtable.org/business-roundtable-redefines-the-purpose-of-a-corporation-to-promote-an-economy-that-serves-all-americans). The signatories of this statement, 181 CEOs, "commit to lead their companies for the benefit of all stakeholders—customers, employees, suppliers, communities, and shareholders." This declaration calls into question the relevance of past leadership theories founded on the ideology of shareholder primacy. Globally, the 2019 Academy of Management Specialized Conference held in Bled, Slovenia chose the theme of "Responsible Leadership in Rising Economies" (https://www.eiseverywhere.com/website/894/home/).

A search of the scholarly literature using the term "responsible leadership" in the title found most of the papers to be conceptual or normative, with some case studies. These papers have focused on the leader's role in corporate social responsibility (e.g., Waldman & Balven, 2014), or on addressing stakeholder needs beyond shareholder returns (e.g., Maak & Pless, 2006). There is thus significant opportunity for systematic empirical studies on the nature, the antecedents, the consequences, and the contextual boundaries of responsible leadership. It is possible that empirical studies on this complex phenomenon are difficult to conduct, but difficulty should not be an excuse for not investigating important problems in society. Responsible leadership in the twenty-first century may be one of those wicked problems that responsible researchers want to tackle. Below, I illustrate how the seven principles of responsible research may guide the study of responsible leadership in different contexts facing both common and unique challenges.

RESPONSIBLE RESEARCH'S IMPLICATIONS FOR STUDYING RESPONSIBLE LEADERSHIP

The seven principles of responsible research may offer some useful guidance in the formulation of research questions, the choice of methods appropriate for the context, and the assurance of useful knowledge. Table 1 offers a few illustrative questions for each of the seven principles that may be considered in designing responsible leadership studies.

A study may not meet all seven principles, but using them as a guide on research design will increase the likelihood that the research findings will be credible and useful. Responsible leadership is of paramount importance in practice, especially as the United Nations is calling on organizations to implement the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (Howell-Grenville, Miller, Davis, Thau, Dyllick, & Tsui, 2019). The U.S. CEO Business Roundtable's redefinition of corporate responsibility suggests that business leaders who used to operate on the premise of shareholder primacy now realize the need to balance stakeholder interests. It is time to understand the who, why, how, and when of responsible leadership to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century.

RESPONSIBLE LEADERSHIP IN MANAGEMENT RESEARCH

The goal of the responsible research movement is to transform current research practices from a focus on only the interests of the researchers and their schools to a focus on the ultimate users of knowledge, including students, managers, and policy-makers. Currently, students or managers are primarily or often treated as instruments rather than as beneficiaries of research. Scientific outputs (research papers) are treated as a private good, benefiting the researchers (in terms of getting hired, promoted, and tenured), the schools (in terms of ranking and reputation), and the publishers (in terms of profit) but not the end-users. The responsible research movement reminds

TABLE 1
Applying the Principles of Responsible Research to the Study of Responsible Leadership—Some Illustrative Questions

Principle 1: Service to Society
a. Why is the idea of "responsible leadership" important in this context and at this time?
b. How is responsible leadership observed or manifested in this context, relative to other contexts?
c. How would societies, developed or emerging, benefit from responsible leadership?

Principle 2: Valuing Both Basic and Applied Contributions
a. How will responsible leadership solve the critical problem organizations face in this economic context?
b. How will responsible leadership studies contribute to the leadership literature in general?
c. Will the discovery (nature, antecedents, or consequences of responsible leadership) contribute to a new theory of leadership (either contextualized or universal), or will it add incremental knowledge?

Principle 3: Valuing Plurality and Multidisciplinary Collaboration
a. Which disciplines are most likely to provide an understanding of this leadership phenomenon? Can different studies be designed using diverse disciplinary lenses?
b. How does the "context" influence the observation or understanding of responsible leadership?
c. Does the design include an exploratory study, a systematic inductive study, hypotheses testing study, in sequence or in parallel?

Principle 4: Sound Methodology
a. What are the "native" or local definitions and behavioral indicators of "responsible leadership"?
b. What method can best capture the subjects' or natives' reality of the phenomenon?
c. Will the constructs be locally developed, or will they be adapted from constructs in the literature (those developed in a different context)? What is the reason for the approach taken?
d. How can researcher *a priori* conceptions or bias be removed or reduced in framing the question or in designing the study?
e. What is being done to ensure the replicability or triangulation of findings?
f. Are the hypotheses and the study design preregistered on an online open science platform?

Principle 5: Stakeholder Involvement
a. How does the study involve the research subjects and other stakeholders in defining or refining the research question and in developing the research design?
b. How are local research collaborators involved in the project? What are their roles?
c. How is researcher independence (from authority or sponsors of the research) ensured?

Principle 6: Impact on Stakeholders
a. What measures are being taken to ensure that the research subjects or participating organizations will benefit from the study?
b. Should there be a Type I or Type II error in the findings, has the "cost" to "users" (leaders, followers, teams, organizations) of the research been assessed?
c. If the research results are to be used to train leaders or inform policies on responsible leadership, have any unintended consequences (positive or negative) thereof been assessed?

Principle 7: Broad Dissemination
a. Will you write a research report for the participating organizations and participating subjects?
b. Is there a plan to provide a seminar or workshop on the research findings and implications for all participating members and organizations?
c. Will the findings be shared with the news media, social media, or other open-access platforms?

us that science is in service to society and that knowledge is a public good. For the business and management discipline, research is to produce credible knowledge to enable all kinds of organizations—academic, business, nonprofit, government, and civil society—to be positive agents of change for a better world. Given its global interest and contemporary importance, responsible leadership is a promising area in which to apply the principles of responsible research. It is also an opportunity for the scientific community in business schools to demonstrate responsible leadership by engaging in responsible research to produce both credible and useful knowledge and to contribute to the common good.

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