

Editorial: Research Methods and Management

Guest Editor: Richard Croucher

Middlesex University Business School, The Burroughs, London NW4 4BT, UK

Email: r.croucher@mdx.ac.uk

Abstract

This article introduces a virtual special issue comprising a selection of innovative and highly-cited articles recently published on methodological questions in the *British Journal of Management (BJM)*. In an initial context section, it is argued that while management research has drawn on methods from the core social sciences, it has cast its net wider to adopt methods from subjects and fields on the edge of the social sciences as they are normally conceived. These have also been important. It has in turn made significant methodological contributions both to those subjects and fields, and indeed more widely. The contributions of the articles selected for inclusion in the special issue are delineated within this broad context.

Key words: management research; methods; methodology

Introduction

This virtual special issue of the *BJM* showcases seven recently published articles taken from the journal's long-standing 'Methodology Corner', all of which have attracted considerable interest reflected in high citation levels in this relatively short time. The articles show methods in practice, making their contributions through concrete experience. They collectively make a substantial contribution to methodological debates in management. Method has not been widely considered to be management researchers' strong suit when considered in a broader social scientific context. Throughout academe, different scholarly traditions remain quite distinctive, generating reservations about other fields. In this case, such reservations may arise from management being seen as closely linked to practical and immediate vocational concerns. We suggest, in common with others (see for example Gibbons *et al.*, 1994), that this may in fact act as a source of methodological innovation. Radaelli and colleagues (2014), in one of our selected *BJM* papers reproduced below, reject the suspicion that practical concerns are associated with weak method when they suggest that

the strengthening of practitioner involvement in research processes improves methodological quality and findings' robustness as well as the researches' relevance to management concerns. Scepticism about management researchers' methodological sophistication may also derive from the idea that, in an era when post-modern and constructivist approaches have become widely advocated, and since top management journals are predominantly quantitative in their orientation, the field is 'positivist', (Willman, 2014). The idea may be reinforced by increasing concerns with the integrity of published practice-related research both in our field and more widely. Management journals have been quick to react. Thus, top finance journals increasingly require authors to provide detailed descriptive statistics in order to defeat possible attempts at 'data dredging' or 'p-Hacking' (see Starbuck, 2016).

Neither a practical orientation nor 'positivism' necessarily entail methodological weakness, and it is hoped here at least to nuance this judgement. In what follows, I initially argue that management research has shown considerable absorptive capacity to induct, combine and develop methods initially used in the social sciences and indeed beyond those sciences' boundaries at least as they are often conceived in this connection (see for example Willman, 2014). I then show how recent *BJM* methodological articles have in a sense gone further by advancing methodological discussions in the disciplines on which they have drawn.

It must be admitted that management research has sometimes justified the more critical judgements. Literature reviews are on occasion restricted in scope. A recent meta-review of scholarship in Human Resource Management (Markoullis *et al.*, 2016) draws attention to several such instances, including two papers published in recent years in reputable journals. These both comprised literature reviews explicitly based on just one of the field's journals. Other significant shortcomings have been uncovered in quantitative work. In one of the *BJM* articles reproduced here, Abdallah and colleagues (2015) point to numerous areas in management research, including finance and international business, in which large volumes of literature continue to present results rendered highly questionable by endogeneity problems.

On the other hand, the field has played a full part in methodologically- innovative social scientific researcher networks. Management researchers have borrowed widely from other disciplines and fields of study and combined many different methodological elements from within social science. Many methodological interventions within the extensive *Cambridge Structural Analysis in the Social Sciences Series* show how sophisticated combinations of methods have been deployed by management scholars in genuinely innovative ways. An example is Gluesing *et al.* (2014) who combine ethnography with information technology

data mining to visualise internationally-networked organisations. Such a combination of methods may clearly be applied to non-management networks. There is reason to hope that management practitioner researchers may make similar contributions in future. Increasingly, practitioner candidates for vocational doctorates have, because of the increasing complexity of the problems they face, used interdisciplinary approaches drawn from different social science subjects and beyond (Costley and Pizzolato, 2017). In this way, management researchers may assist in further encouraging multi-disciplinary approaches in the social sciences.

In what follows, after acknowledging the importance of methodological ‘imports’ from social science, I first illustrate three of the more important imports from outside that field, from medical science, history and geography respectively. In the following section I underline the particular contribution made by the selected contributions to the *BJM*’s ‘Methodology corner’, which serve to demonstrate the field’s continuing vitality and innovative capacity in that area.

Imports to management research: social science and beyond

Methodological advance is a multi-faceted process. Knowledge is ultimately a whole, the borders between management, social sciences and other areas are necessarily both fuzzy and porous (the increasingly blurred boundary between international business and economic geography may serve as an example). Methods are often developed by inter-disciplinary groups and industry-academic communities of practice. Dyadic exchanges between subject areas therefore encapsulate only part of the broader process of methodological advance. Nevertheless, dyadic exchanges form part of the picture and social sciences clearly constitute the management field’s methodological foundations (Willman, 2014). The point need not be laboured, but to take just one of the more important examples, an important recent methodological import from social science (recognised as of growing importance by Radaelli and colleagues (2014) in the article reproduced in this issue) has been increasingly sophisticated techniques in multi-level analysis. Overall, these improvements have undoubtedly increased the possibility of distinguishing between and relating macro and micro levels, as called for in a previous *BJM* virtual issue on employee reactions to changing work practices (Frynas and Croucher, 2015). The limitations of multi-level modelling have been gradually diminished, *inter alia* by use of multi-level Structural Equation Modelling, notably by psychologists (for a recent example, see Preacher *et al.*, 2016). Deploying multi-level analytic techniques on international datasets has proved increasingly useful in opening new

possibilities to researchers in international and comparative business. It has for example been used to distinguish between cultural and institutional effects by Gooderham *et al.* (2015). Examining the variables impacting the use of pay for individual performance, the authors underlined the relatively high significance of national-level institutional influence, in comparison to the more commonly-cited cultural factors.

Management researchers have also adopted, codified and developed methods from clearly non-social scientific sources. David Tranfield and colleagues (2003), writing in the *BJM*, gave impetus to discussion of the uses of ‘systematic’, structural meta-reviews in management research. Just twenty-five years ago, a much-used if introductory social science research methods handbook contained no entry on meta-analysis (Vogt, 1993). Yet the approach had by then been widely used in medical science to establish the weight of evidential support for different treatments which had been extensively researched via a wide range of different methods in various contexts. Management’s similar concern with the practical implications of disparate and fragmented research required, Tranfield and his colleagues pointed out, recognition of the particular relevance of a highly-structured, comprehensive approach to distilling the balance of findings in published research on rigorously-defined topics. Systematic review has since developed in tandem with bibliometrics. An example is science mapping frameworks, which have assisted management scholars (see Markoulli *et al.*, 2016 for an example) in broadening the volume of publications that can realistically be surveyed, assists in applying rigor to accurate field definition and enhances levels of detail in presenting field content (van Eck and Waltman, 2010). The approach has become well-established not only in management but also more widely in the social sciences in the last fifteen years. The method helps highlight the topic strengths, lacunae and intellectual structures of fields and sub-fields while showing clusters of work and facilitating comparison with practitioner concerns. More widely, it has encouraged broad assessments of the state of different collective meta ‘research programmes’ within management in the Lakatosian (Lakatos 1978) sense, permitting evaluations of the major question of how far the programmes could be seen as ‘progressive’ in Lakatos’ terms. A ‘progressive’ programme would be advancing theory within its core paradigms; the collective weight of anomalies would not therefore require production of new paradigms.

A second example of an important import from outside social science is that of historical method’s influence on management research. Since the mid-1970s, broad analysis of national historical trajectories strongly informed the study of the influence of political and

legal traditions on labour market institutions. Institutional studies made critical use of classical (assumed) Rankean historical methods by making exhaustive use of archival materials and fit-for-purpose hierarchies of evidence combined with other methods grounded in long-standing historical epistemologies. A classic example is Hugh Clegg, Fox and Thompson (first volume of three published 1964) in relation to the evolution of British trade unions and the industrial relations system, a highly detailed account which itself represented an historical contribution to understanding British management (see also Fox, 1985). Similar methods were adopted and extended by other management scholars such as Howard Gospel in his past-and-present evaluation of British HRM practices (Gospel, 1992). Some researchers concerned with the post-soviet countries published in a similar vein, Confronted by the issue of Soviet legacies after 1989 and primarily interested in ownership and management policies and behaviours' impacts on workers, they combined ethnography with use of factory newspapers and the factory archives prevalent in the former 'socialist' countries (Morrison, 2008; Danilovich *et al.*, 2015; Danilovich, 2016). The USSR's collapse and the advent of 'varieties of capitalism' analyses gave further impetus to management researchers' renewed interest in institutions and institutional theory, national business systems and the 'path dependency' concept. The influential institutionalist Douglass North, through advancing quantitative 'Cliometric' approaches to international business subjects, had already shown how statistical methods could be used to establish secular patterns at national and industrial levels to investigate these concepts. Their acceptance at least by some has been signalled by publication in top journals (see for example Avdia *et al.*, 2000). Such methodological approaches derived from history have been advocated in relation to longitudinal investigation of marketing strategy (Slater, 1995) and elaborated in connection with research on the evolution of management networks (Welch, 2000). Supply chain scholars, introducing a special issue of the *Journal of Supply Chain Management* had much to say by way of advocacy of archival method to their field. *Inter alia*, they disseminated the classical historians' view that characterised archival data as 'generally more objective' than those obtained from both the surveys which abound in management, and as superior to interview data, since it was 'free from contamination by respondent perceptions' of researchers' purpose' (Calantone and Vickery, 2009: 94). Others, writing in leading journals, have advocated increased use of organisational archives to generate a range of types of history in order to further refine theory in organisation studies (Rowlinson *et al.*, 2014). As Rowlinson *et al.* (2014) acknowledge, mutual methodological scepticism between historians and management researchers persists. The ways his colleagues approach historical method

have recently been sharply criticised as ‘positivist’ by an historiographer of accounting history. Yet this criticism itself contains acknowledgement of the subject’s importations from discourse theory deriving from the constructivist and linguistic ‘turns’ embraced by some historians (Gaffikin, 2011).

Further examples from disciplines not normally considered to be in the mainstream of social science could be adduced. Economic geography (despite its historic reluctance to debate method; Barnes and Christopher, 2018: 132), has also contributed to scholarship on business and globalisation. Spatial methods imported from geography such as Geographic Information Systems have been increasingly influential in business research. These have been applied *inter alia* to form the basis of wide-ranging analyses of globalization (see for example Dixon, 2014) as well as to detailed research in connection with firm location decision-making, geo- demographic analysis and marketing. Many of these methods have been used as the basis of research tools marketed to businesses as well as universities. Meanwhile, behavioural geography itself benefitted from long-standing methodological flows from business and management. Herbert Simon, through his extensive work on organisational decision-taking spanning decades, played a role in initiating the behavioural geography field of study and indeed in disseminating behavioural approaches in the social sciences more widely (Rieser, 1973).

Selected recent *BJM* Methodology Corner articles: introduction and appreciation

The articles selected for inclusion here were initially published in the last 5 years and have been chosen for the high level of citations they have already received. Collectively, they show how explicit discussion of methodological matters continues to draw from social science and beyond, but also demonstrate the extent to which debates within management manifest increasing independence. Indeed, on occasion they make ‘reverse diffusion’ contributions of potential value to social scientists.

The first three articles featured all deal with issues in case study research and respondents’ involvement. They offer alternative perspectives on the organisations concerned and constitute a mutually-supportive tight cluster. Trau *et al.*, (2013) deal with a significant issue of concern to sociology and education researchers as well as to management scholars. The authors both draw on and develop the action research tradition, constructively supplement the growing and increasingly salient literature on the appropriate methods for ‘netology’ whilst contributing to conceptualisations of research ethics. The authors show how, in a research

project, participatory research, preceded by a broad-based recruitment strategy was used successfully to raise involvement levels by respondents who could be categorised as ‘invisible’ stigmatised groups, illustrating their argument by reference to gay men including those who remained closeted. Burns *et al.* (2014) contribute in a similar, complementary vein as they seek to deepen inquiry through involving groups often ignored in management and organisational research. They also add to the well-established tradition of participatory and action research in applied social studies, in an area of clear and ongoing public concern. Basing their methodological contribution on a study of care quality (including mistreatment) in elder care, they develop an approach designed to increase the voice possibilities for sometimes unheard actors. They propose a three-stage method for activating such processes: mobilising communities, activating participation and re-defining context. This generates alternative perspectives on the organisations concerned. The method holds out the prospect of transcending top management views on organizations, to open up quite novel and much-needed perspectives from below that can achieve more rounded depictions of organisations. Radaelli *et al.*, 2014 also contribute to debates—already lively in the education field-- about the use of research methods designed to involve organisational actors more intensively. Asserting, in common with other influential voices, the distance between many practitioners and management research, they argue for a more participatory approach. They use a form of intervention research initially conceived of by a research group in the Ecole des Mines, Paris, hitherto only weakly diffused and poorly adopted possibly because of the complexity of its design and management. The authors provide a positive case study from the Italian fashion industry designed to improve the ways in which organisational structures facilitate creativity, a crucial issue in many contemporary contexts.

The next two articles are concerned with analysing and theorising from qualitative research. Illia *et al.* (2014) show the advantages and issues presented by the computerised textual analysis programme ALCESTE in analysing large qualitative data sets from a discourse theory perspective. The article draws on framing theory from sociology and media research. ALCESTE facilitates co-occurrence analysis, little used in management research despite its advantages. The latter include the limitations it sets on researcher subjectivity and its capacity for permitting cross-organisational analysis. Not the least of the method’s advantages is its efficiency, a serious plus in an era of declining public funding for research. The article argues that use of ALCESTE may facilitate the study of narrative fidelity and frame amplification and, more widely, the further development of discourse theory, an area of

interest that transcends management. The article by Ridder (2014) *et al.* addresses a matter of particular interest to management scholars, social scientists and historians alike and indeed researchers in all of the many fields where case studies may be used. A distinctive and especially helpful aspect of the guidance it provides is that it does not assume that the case studies in question are yet to be conducted, but rather provide *post-hoc* assistance. Building on Eisenhardt's seminal work on case study methodology, it deals with the often-discussed subject of locating case studies designed to build theory in relation to prior theory. Three key ways of doing so are advanced and illustrated by reference to selected case studies which have used the 'dynamic capabilities' concept in strategy. The advantages of synergistic, antagonistic and pluralistic dialogues with theory, categories at the centre of the authors' contribution, are advanced.

The last cluster of articles brings together work on survey design and data analysis. Singh *et al.*, (2016) present a detailed argument in favour of the use of subjective measures of organisational performance in surveys provided that they are carefully planned. They challenge the common but naïve objection that more 'objective' measures such as profit and loss accounts or even stock-market valuations ought to be preferred. The authors point out that such 'objective' measures are only infrequently comparable between countries and industries. They demonstrate, using an analysis of managers' responses to questions about organisational performance, that these are consistently accurate across four sets of companies examined. The results, in common with those of some of the other articles referred to above and reproduced below, therefore lend support to the very few international surveys such as the long-running Cranet survey of HR policies and practices which are conducted at organisational level. Abdallah *et al.* (2015), writing on the commonly-encountered endogeneity problem criticises much published research in accounting. A critical examination of literature and an analysis of cross-listed companies' data are used. These show how failure to adjust for omitted variable bias and simultaneous and dynamic endogeneity can generate incorrect inferences. They therefore propose a range (or 'road map') of measures for avoiding such sources of error when using panel data. Given the widespread use of statistical techniques on panel data and indeed their predominance in many American social science as well as management journals, the article is clearly highly significant.

Conclusion

The seven already influential articles reviewed above and reproduced below demonstrate methodological contributions showing the management field's eclectic methodological roots in social science and, as we have argued, beyond. The management field's tendency to draw on a wide range of methodological traditions clearly reflects its nature as a field rather than a discipline, but is also tied in with the increasingly complex problems with managers themselves face. This tendency can only be positive in the sense that it raises the potential for extending the field's ability to ask new questions. Indeed, the importation and reverse diffusion processes and their dynamics could themselves constitute an interesting direction for further research.

References

- Abdallah, W., Goergen, M. and O'Sullivan, N. (2015). Endogeneity – how failure to correct for it can cause wrong inferences and some remedies. *British Journal of Management*, **24**, pp. 791-804. DOI: 10.1111/1467-8551.12113.
- Avdia, P.G., Locke, E.A., Smith, K.G. (2000). The paradox of success: An archival and a laboratory study of strategic persistence following radical environmental change. *Academy of Management Journal*, **43**, pp. 837-853.
- Barnes, T.J., Christophers, B. (2018). *Economic Geography: a Critical Introduction*. Wiley Blackwell: Hoboken, New Jersey.
- Burns, D., Hyde, P., Killet, A., Poland, F. and Gray, R. (2014). Participatory organizational research: Examining voice in the co-production of knowledge. *British Journal of Management*, **25**, pp. 133-144. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-8551.2012.00841.x.
- Calantone, R. Vickery, S.K. (2009). Special Topic forum on Using Archival and Secondary Data Sources in Supply Chain Management Research. *Journal of Supply Chain Management*, **45**, pp. 53- 54. DOI: 10.1111/j.1745-493X.2009.03165x.
- Clegg, H.A., Fox, A., Thompson, A.F. *A History of British Trade Unions since 1889*. (1964). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Costley, C., N. Pizzolato. (2018). Transdisciplinary Qualities in Practice Doctorates. *Studies in Continuing Education*, **40**, pp. 30-45. DOI: 10.1080/0158037X.2017.1394287.

Danilovich, H. (2016). Struggling to be heard: the past and present of employee voice in Belarus. In: *Employee Voice in Emerging Economies*. Pyman, A., Gollan, P. J., Wilkinson, A., and Xu, C., Kalfa, S., (eds.) *Advances in Industrial and Labor Relations*, 23. Bingley, Emerald Group Publishing: pp. 105-135.

Danilovich H., Croucher, R., Makovskaya, N. (2015). Compulsory reduced working time in Belarus: Incidence, operation and consequences. *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, **38**, pp. 723-740

Dixon, A.D. (2014). *The new Geography of Capitalism: Firms, Finance and Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Fox, A. (1985). *History and Heritage. Social Origins of the British Industrial Relations System*. London: George Allen and Unwin.

Frynas, J.G., Croucher, R. (2015). Editorial: Employee responses to changing work practices *British Journal of Management*. DOI: 10.1111/1467-8551.12112.

Gaffikin, M. (2011). What is (accounting) history? *Accounting History*, **16**, pp. 235-251.

Gibbons, M., Limoges, C., Nowotny, H., Schwartzman, S., Scott, P., Trow, M. (1994). *The new production of knowledge: the dynamics of science and research in contemporary societies*. London: Sage.

Gluesing, J.C., Riopelle, K.R., Danowski, J.A. (2014). 'Mixing ethnography and information technology data mining to visualise innovation networks in globally-networked organisation', in Dominguez, S., Hollstein, B. (eds.), *Mixed Methods in Social Network Research. Design and Applications*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: pp. 237-268.

Gooderham, P., Fenton O'Creevy, M., Croucher, R., Brookes, M. (2018). A multi-level analysis of the use of individual pay-for-performance systems. *Journal of Management*, **44**, pp. 1479-1504. DOI: 10.1177/0149206315610634.

Gospel, H. (1992). *Markets, Firms and the Management of Labour in Modern Britain*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Illia, L., Sonpar, K. and Bauer, M. (2014). Applying co-occurrence text analysis with ALCESTE to studies of impression management. *British Journal of Management*, **25**, pp. 352-372. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-8551.2012.00842.x.

- Lakatos., I. (1978). *The Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes: Philosophical Papers Volume 1*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Markoullis, M., Lee, C.I.S.G., Byington, E., Felps, W.A. (2017). Mapping Human Resource Management: Reviewing the Field and Charting Future Directions. *Human Resource Management Review*, **27**, pp. 367-396. DOI: 10.1016/j.hrmr.2016. 10.001.
- Morrison, C. (2008). *A Russian Factory Enters the Market Economy*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Preacher, K. J., Zhang, Z., Zyphur, M. J. (2016). Multilevel structural equation models for assessing moderation within and across levels of analysis. *Psychological Methods*, **21**, 189-205.
- Radaelli, G., Guerci, M., Cirella, S. and Shani, A.B.R. (2014). Intervention research as management research in practice: Learning from a case in the fashion design industry. *British Journal of Management*, **25**, pp. 335-351. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-8551.2012.00844.x.
- Ridder, H.G., Hoon, C. and Baluch, A.M. (2014). Entering a dialogue: positioning case study findings towards theory. *British Journal of Management*, **25**, pp. 373-387. DOI: 10.1111/1467-8551.12000.
- Rieser, R. (1973). The territorial illusion and behavioural sink: critical reflections on behavioural geography. *Antipode* , **5**, pp. 52-7.
- Rowlinson, M., Hassard, J. and Decker, S. (2014). Research strategies for organisational history: a dialogue between historical theory and organization theory. *Academy of Management Review*, **39**, pp. 250–74.
- Singh, S., Darwish, T. and Potocnik, K. (2016). Measuring organizational performance: A case for subjective measures. *British Journal of Management*, **27**, pp. 214-224. DOI: 10.1111/1467-8551.12126.
- Slater, S.F. (1995). Issues in conducting marketing strategy research *Journal of Strategic Marketing*, **3**, pp. 257-70.
- Starbuck, W.H. (2016). How journals could improve research practice in social science. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, **61**, pp. 165-183.

Tranfield, D., Denyer, D., Smart, P. (2003). Towards a methodology for developing evidence-informed management knowledge by means of systematic review. *British Journal of Management*, **14**, pp. 207-222.

Trau, R.N.C, Hartel, C.E.J. and Hartel, G.F. (2013). Reaching and hearing the invisible: Organizational research on invisible stigmatised groups via web surveys. *British Journal of Management*, **24**, pp. 532-541. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-8551.2012.00826.x.

Van Eck, N.J., Waltman, L. (2010). Software survey: VOSviewer, a computer programme bibliometric mapper. *Scientometrics*, **84**, pp. 523-538.

Vogt, W.P. (1993). *Dictionary of Statistics and Methodology. A non-technical guide for the social sciences*. London: Sage.

Welch, C. (2000). The Archaeology of Business Networks: the use of archival records in case study research. *Journal of Strategic Marketing*, **8**, pp. 197-208.

Willman, P. (2014). *Understanding Management. The social science foundations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.