

AHISTORICITY IN MANAGEMENT RESEARCH

**Ahistoricity in Management Research: A critique of pure empiricist stance**

Mudassir Farooqi

Mudassir Farooqi

Lahore Leads University Garden Town Lahore

[mudassirfarooqi@leads.edu.pk](mailto:mudassirfarooqi@leads.edu.pk)

Dr. Naveed Yazdani

[yazdani@umt.edu.pk](mailto:yazdani@umt.edu.pk)

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## ABSTRACT

This theoretical paper focuses on the application of pure empiricism in management research. The paper traces the ahistoric consequences of empiricism in management research. It first traces the evolution of empiricism as an art of inquiry based on Cartesian dualism. It then focuses on empiricism as a dominant methodology of management research. The paper also traces the consequences of empiricism and resulting ahistoricity in the form of gap between management research and practice, moral and ethical problems in organizations. The underlying question which the paper raises is the ahistoricity in management research as a byproduct of pure empiricist stance. The paper concludes by proposing that for the management research to be effective and useful for the practitioner it has to bring context specific knowledge of organizations.

### Key Words:

Ahistoricity, Empiricism, Management Research ,Dualism

## INTRODUCTION

The aim of every research activity in any field of knowledge is the contribution to existing body of knowledge (Corley & Gioia, 2011). Since the primitive time to today's age of globalization the purpose remained the same but the methods of knowledge creation varied. The management research is aimed at studying organizations and deals with the human beings (Medsker et al., 1994). The human beings are the building blocks of organizations and in this view organizations are social entities (Broom et al., 1997; Ringberg & Reihlen, 2008). The purpose of management research is also the same and is meant for creation of knowledge of organization.

The organizations are social entities that work and sustain their operations in a social context (Broom et al., 1997; McAuley et al., 2007, p. 4). As the societies are getting more and more industrialized the knowledge creation activity in organizations is also becoming popular (Rappa, 2003). In this line various methods of studying human beings which make organizations are used in management research (Passmore, 1953). This paper aims to explore the pure empiricist stance and its effects in the management research. The management research falls under the domain of organizational science and organizational science is the sub field of social science (Behling, 1980). Among the various available methods of studying in social sciences the management research is dominated by the positivist school and is done through the methodology of empiricism (Mangan, 2009; Morgan & Smircich, 1980).<sup>1</sup>

The empiricism in its definition is a sensual experience where anything that is measurable and can be observed by the researcher can only add to existing body of knowledge (Sellars et al., 1997). According to Karl Popper, an empiricist is the one who deduce hypothesis and test these

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<sup>1</sup> According to Bryman and Bell (2007) research designs available for any research are, experimental, cross sectional, social survey, longitudinal, case study, and comparative.

hypothesis by observation and experiment (Popper, 1959, p. 11-13). In this view empirical science is the knowledge of real world, a knowledge that can be attained by testing the objects and this is the true way of contributing to knowledge. Similarly empiricism in management research claims that it has observed real objects (humans) and has measured humans objectively. The underlying assumptions of empiricism in management research are validity and reliability so that generalization and replication of knowledge can be maintained<sup>2</sup>. For the purpose of generalization and replication in management research, empiricism has to separate social and cultural context from the research inquiry. The separation of social and cultural context is also important for empiricism as the underlying epistemology of empiricism is rooted in Cartesian Dualism. The Cartesian Dualism is based on the philosophy of Rene Descartes who presented his idea of Dualism (Descartes & Veitch, 1969, p. 13-19). According to Descartes for the true method of inquiry with a potential to find true knowledge one has to separate mind and matter from the knowledge inquiry (Passmore, 1953). So the Cartesian Dualism as the underlying bases of empiricism in management research separates social and cultural context from humans and leads to ahistoricity in management research.<sup>3</sup>

The empiricism is the dominant methodology in management research, but it has been critiqued time and again on various bases (Ramsay, 1998; Rogers, 1978; Singer, 1998). For the purpose of this paper the pure empiricist stance has been critiqued on the basis of Einstein's theory of relativity, Institutional theory and difficulty of maintaining replication and generalization of empiricism in management research. The theory of relativity combines time

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<sup>2</sup> Validity and reliability are concerned with the specification of variables that are observed. Unless or until variables don't measure the observed phenomenon they are not valid and reliable

<sup>3</sup> For the purpose of this paper ahistoricity means, knowledge which is acontextual and has not incorporated social and cultural dimensions of organizations.

and space and as result combines mind and matter (Miller, 1982). In this view the paper is arguing that when there is synthesis of mind and matter Cartesian dualism is challenged. The challenge to Cartesian dualism challenges the epistemology of empiricism.

Similarly the institutional theory asserts that organizations tend to adopt social and historical consequences of society in their operations so they can become similar (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). This social and historical evolution of organizations then claims the incorporation of social and historical dimensions in knowledge creation (Cohler, 1988; Kivinen & Piirainen, 2007). The replication and generalization which are two basis demises of empiricism are also difficult to maintain in management research (Hubbard et al., 1998). As for replication and generalization it is essential to have similar organizational context. The similar organizational context means humans with same genetic and social makeup. The only way to have similar result in the form of replication and generalization, empiricism has to separate social context of the humans and as result organizations (Morgan & Smircich, 1980). This then leads to knowledge which is neither socially and historically contextual nor relevant to organizational problems (Marsden, 1982). So the result is creation of knowledge which is ahistoric and doesn't include social context in it.

### Research Question

Based on above discussion the paper raises the question that,

What are the implications of ahistoricity in management research?

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In order to answer the raised question the paper will use the epistemology of constructionism. The theoretical perspective will be interpretivism. The research methodology will be comparative analysis. The paper is using constructionism as the epistemology of research methodology as it is not using positivist or post positivist stance (Crotty, 1998, p. 4). Further the paper is constructing the argument through the theoretical perspective of interpretivism (Woodside & Wilson, 2003). As the paper is not finding an objective truth through observation but interpreting the truth through methodology of comparative analysis (Benson, 1977). The paper is comparing the pure empiricist stance with the social construction of reality (Crotty, 1998, p. 43,58).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Empiricism

The empiricism is a sensual experience which is based on observation and measurement of object (Carruthers & Macdonald, 1990). In this way an empiricist is the one who finds the truth by observing the phenomenon in a purely objective manner (Popper, 1959, p. 14,15). The underlying bases of empiricism are generalization and replication of knowledge through observation of reality (Carruthers & Macdonald, 1990). For the empiricists reality is always there, the role of observer is to find the reality through observation. The empiricism claims by only by observation, reality can be found and when it is generalized and replicated it becomes

the true knowledge (Enfield, 1991). Hence the empiricists claim that this is the only way of finding true and reliable knowledge<sup>4</sup>.

#### Evolution of Empiricism and disappearance of Formal Logic and Reasoning

The epistemological roots of empiricism as a hard methodology of finding the truth through observations can be traced back to Descartes who presented his philosophy of Cartesian dualism (Aronowitz & Ausch, 2000). According to the Cartesian dualism there is the separation of mind and matter (Enfield, 1991). Descartes asserts the inquiry for knowledge should be focused towards finding the truth by observing the facts (Enfield, 1991; Passmore, 1953). Here the observer has to separate himself from the inquiry, as observer and observed are bounded to Cartesian Dualism which lays the foundation of separation of mind and matter (Passmore, 1953). If the observed and observer are not separated the art of inquiry on Cartesian pattern vanishes at once. By this separation of mind and matter, positivism and resulting empiricist inquiry of finding the true knowledge are introduced in research of all disciplines (Passmore, 1953). Further this objectivity of knowledge is also essential for finding the truth for two reasons. First for the truth to be acceptable everywhere it should be objective (Ramsay, 1998) i.e. it must be free from observer's own judgments and beliefs. Secondly it can be then generalized everywhere in the world (Popper, 1959, p. 19).

The Cartesian view is further supported by Locke, Hume and Popper who favored logic and rationality of observation in research through empiricism. Locke, in his critique of formal logic

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<sup>4</sup> Validity and reliability are concerned with the specification of variables that are observed. Unless or until variables do not measure the observed phenomenon they are not valid and reliable (Diamantopoulos & Schlegelmilch, 1997, p. 16,90 )

and reasoning claims that, formal logic and reasoning leads to “syllogism” and “syllogism” is based on human own ideas, which cannot be observed by facts (Rogers, 1978). If we cannot measure observation then we cannot find the truth. Hence formal logic and reasoning are against the empiricism and are replaced by facts and rationality. The same view is opined by Mills (1939) that for empiricism to be a well established method of inquiry in the tradition of Descartes, Locke and Hume; it has to depart from formal reasoning and logic. As formal reasoning and logic are based on Human’s own ideas and perception, these ideas are rooted in his very own genetic makeup, which are then shaped by society and culture (Mills, 1939). If observer is using his own ideas he has denied Dualism and in return he is not and empiricist.

#### Empiricism in social sciences

The empiricism in the social sciences is used as the method of reducing social phenomenon to observable facts (Backhaus, 1994). In social sciences for empiricism to be valid it has to reduce social realities to observable facts (Kivinen & Piironen, 2007). Although Durkheim for the first time used empiricism for social inquiry but its roots in social sciences are quite primitive.

According to Crotty (1998, p. 20-25) from Comte’s to Vienna Circle positivism is there in social sciences, initially it was used as distinction between positive religion and natural religion. But the time period of enlightenment in the west made west to embrace a method of knowledge creation whose primary objective is to reduce everything to observable facts (Aronowitz & Ausch, 2000; Giedymin, 1975; Rappa, 2003).

Starting from enlightenment to today’s world of globalization, the reduction of knowledge through empiricism shadows the most of research activity in social sciences (Aronowitz &

Ausch, 2000). Hence in social sciences complex social realities and human characteristics have been reduced to observable facts, and those characteristics that are not reducible are rejected (Hatchuel, 2005; Huselid, 1995; Lundy, 1994).

This view is further strengthened by Hume and Kant who asserted that if we want to add true knowledge of human beings we have to separate object and subject in the tradition of Cartesian Dualism (Aronowitz & Ausch, 2000; Draper, 2009; Passmore, 1953).

### Empiricism and 20<sup>th</sup> century's Development in the Science

The positivist philosophy of acquiring true knowledge dominated the west after enlightenment to the mid of 20th century (Carruthers & Macdonald, 1990; Giedymin, 1975; Goddard, 1973).

The credit of using a pure empiricism in all spheres of knowledge goes to positivists like Hume, Kant and Popper who used and asserted the positivist framework for acquiring true knowledge (Rogers, 1978; Singer, 1998; Worrall, 1984). But later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century various historical developments in the philosophy of sciences, turns the wave against positivism and resulting methodology of empiricism (Fuller, 1992; Kilmann, 2001, p. 17-19).

The evolution of species by natural selection, an idea given by Charles Darwin that species evolve by time and adopts environmental characteristics in their genes (Axelrod & Hamilton, 1981). The Hegelian Philosophy of totality of knowledge, the idea of historical linking of knowledge with the society by Karl Marx, Earnest Mach idea of relativity of time and space, Michael Morley experiment and Riemann's challenge to Euclidian geometry, all challenged the Newton's science and as a result Cartesian Dualism (Aronowitz & Ausch, 2000; Gladwin et al., 1995). Further the Einstein's theory of relativity which asserts that space and time are not

separate also paves the way against Newton's paradigm (Kilmann, 2001). From here the paper argues that basis demises of empiricism Cartesian Dualism and Newton's science are challenged hence the empiricism in its pure sense is challenged.

#### The claim of Empiricism and Complexity of Management Sciences

From the above discussion the paper supports the notion that in social sciences reality is created through social interactions (Bois, 1978, p. 181,201 ; Perrow, 1986, p. 157,158 ; Zaret, 1980). So when organizations are social entities the reality in organizations is also created through social interactions (Perrow, 1961). In this line humans who are the building blocks of organizations are involved in social interactions and this result in construction of social reality (Budhwar & Debrah, 2009; Meyer, 2006; Paauwe, 2009; Rousseau, 2001). Further it is opined by Karboski that human beings by their genetic makeup make organizations a complex and dynamic field of inquiry (Bois, n.d, p. 178). This complexity is added further by social and cultural variations (Pun et al., 2000). In order to handle this complexity of organizations empiricism in management research follows the same tradition of reducing complexity through variables (Linsteadl, 1994; Passmore, 1953). As a result the diverse human beings in organizations are defined by those variables that can be observed.

In this line Whyte (1956, p. 182,183) opined that, the empiricist stance in social sciences and its applications in management research are capable of measuring only those human beings who possess moderate characteristics. As human who possess extraordinary level of excellence cannot be observed through predefined variables. The human beings are complex they inherently think and analyze the circumstances and when they are tried to observe through

variables they can manipulate the variables according to their own thinking. In this view the objectivity of knowledge is questioned (p. 186-189). This objectivity of knowledge is further questioned by inability of empiricism to replicate and generalize the results (Hubbard et al., 1998). According to Ramsay (1998) there are very little chances of replication and generalization in social sciences as when a study of same assumptions is applied in another context its results changes. Hence the basic premises of empiricism i.e. objectivity, replication and generalization are difficult to maintain in social sciences (Hair et al., 1998, p. 585). Despite this, empiricists in management research attempts to develop objectivity and in order to maintain this objectivity deprive the knowledge through every day problems of organizations. Here this argument is further strengthened by Crotty (1998) "Positivists science is not the everyday world we experience".

#### Sartre, Institutional theory and claim of empiricism

According to Sartre (1963, p.100) the character of human beings is shaped by its learning from society since his childhood. It encapsulates the social and cultural dimensions in personality of an individual; the influence of society and social institutions are not reducible factors from the individuals. The claim of Sartre (1963, p.92-96) that social engagements of human beings are always dynamic these engagements reflects the past in present and modifies the future. The same view is opined by Collingwood that history is always contemporary, it reflects the past in present (Collingwood, 1965, p. 9). So, aim of knowledge creation in social sciences is to historically trace the knowledge that has been shaped by human interference with the society (Rubinoff, 1968). Sartre paves the way of knowledge creation that is embedded in society and it

has been evolved historically. In this line Weber also claims that knowledge is always socially bounded and it is shaped by the history of society (Reicher et al., 2005; Seidman, 1984).

This historical and social bounding of human knowledge is also supported by Institutional theory (Scott, 1987). According to institutional theory organizations are shaped by social factors of society in the form of institutions (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). There are three institutional forces coercive, mimetic and normative that act on organizations and force the organizations to adopt social and cultural dimension in their structure and culture (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983)<sup>5</sup>.

This view of institutional theory is also in line with the aim of knowledge creation which is to explore the knowledge which is socially and historically bounded in the society (Axelrod & Hamilton, 1981). Hence the knowledge which gets spark from empiricism does not include human and social factors in it (Giedymin, 1975; Lundy, 1994). If the aim of knowledge creation in management research is knowledge creation for the well being of society then empiricism fails to do so (Aronowitz & Ausch, 2000).

#### Ahistoric Consequences of Empiricism in management research

From the above discussion paper argues that application of pure empiricism in management research results in knowledge that is ahistorical (Kilduff et al., 2011). Here by ahistorical knowledge we are claiming that knowledge which is socially and culturally free. The knowledge which is free from socio cultural values is acontextual and as a result ahistoric (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011). As empiricism reduces complexity of humans in organizations by defining variables, so the variables don't incorporate social and cultural dimensions (Whyte, 1956, p.

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<sup>5</sup> The coercive, mimetic and normative forces are also called isomorphic forces. The coercive forces are political forces in the society, mimetic forces arise from uncertainty and normative forces are rooted in professionalization.

189-194). This ahistoricity is also questioned by Thomas Kuhn (1996) , Paul Feyerabend (1996) and Hanson (1965) who claim that as knowledge of social science is related to society and its applications are used in industries the empiricism is creating that knowledge which is neither useful for society nor for organizations (Aronowitz & Ausch, 2000). So the reduction of knowledge by empiricism on the one hand promoted the development of weapons for mass destruction and it also led to moral and ethical problems (Ghoshal, 2005).

It is in this line the paper argues that the corporate scandals of this century, gender and religious biases are the direct consequences of ahistoricity of management research (Ghoshal & Moran, 1996; Jarzabkowski & Whittington, 2008; Kochan, 2002). As humans are socially and culturally bounded with society, if the aim of research activity is observation and measurement it will erode those human dimensions that are essential for moral and ethical bases (Whyte, 1956,197-201). The separation is also essential for empiricism to hold, because morality and ethics comes from human's mind and empiricism claims that human mind has to be separated from the knowledge creation (Ringberg & Reihlen, 2008). As from mind comes the human subjectivity, which hurts the objectivity of empiricism and in this way empiricism results in ahistoricity. According to Asdal (2005), the research in social sciences is meant for human beings and pure empiricism in social sciences deprives research from social dimensions and it leads to social and ethical problems (Asdal, 2005). Similarly the removal of context from knowledge leads to those theories which promote individuals and has no link with the social progress (Ghoshal, 2005). The same view is opined by Shareef (2007) that management research dominated by positivists lead to that knowledge which promotes self interest and

ethical dilemmas. As knowledge is not socially bounded so it will lead to ahistoricity and ahistoricity will lead to context free knowledge (Miah & Bird, 2007).

Besides the ethical and moral issues the ahistoricity in management research also leads to a gap between research and practice (Boxenbaum & Rouleau, 2011). As management practitioners are in the view that management scholars should come up with theories that are relevant to organizational problems (Corley & Gioia, 2011; Kilduff et al., 2011; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011; Shipp & Jansen, 2011). The theories should bring in the contextual factors, because context is the most important element for organizations and their management (Blyton & Turnbull, 1992; Hofstede, 2007; Khilji, 2003). The theories which are proposed as a result of rigor and fancy statistics fail to solve practical problems of organizations (Khan, 2010; Meyer, 2006).

## DISCUSSION

The historical roots of empiricism are linked to enlightenment period of west. At that time philosophers like Descartes promoted the idea of dualism; it received a warm welcome from society and scholars as it helped to get rid of problems created by religion and church. The industrialization of society gives importance to organizations and as result creation of organizational knowledge gets importance among scholars. But the organizational studies followed the same pattern of Descartes and the methodology which is used for separation of church and religion dominated the organizations.

The empiricism in management research always focuses on objective knowledge creation. In the quest of objective knowledge creation it neglects the problems that results from social interactions of organizations. As a result objective creation of knowledge promotes capitalism,

unethical decision making in organizations and a gap between management practice and theories. The objective knowledge promotes the idea of self interest and by objective knowledge humans feel that as knowledge is not culturally and socially bounded so they are not liable to answer society. So the ultimate goal of knowledge creation which is well being of society as a whole get hurts. It is in this line we argue that empiricism in management research is like a Quail nest that always laid her egg in other's nest and at the birth each child breaks the existing eggs so that competition can be reduced. The same is the application of empiricism in management research where human beings in an objective manner are reduced to those characteristics that can be measured. By this humans are promoted to destroy or harm the others so that competition can be reduced.

The empiricism results in rigor of management research, where variables deduced from grounded theories are applied for new knowledge creation. This results in knowledge which is far away from context specific nature of organizations. Here the paper is arguing in line with empiricism, human beings tested in USA are same as human beings in Pakistan. The knowledge resulting from empiricism is not relevant to context of the organizations. There is a need for relevance rather than rigor of management research. This relevance can be created when research will incorporate social and cultural dimensions in research inquiry. So to remove the ahistoricity of management research there is a need for combination of objective and subjective knowledge. This will bring social and cultural dimensions in its findings and will be beneficial for the organizations and society at a large.

## CONCLUSION

It is wisely mentioned by Margret Thatcher, "Positivism brings us only problems, not solutions".

From this and the discussion presented in the paper, the paper is concluding by following remarks,

- 1- The industrialization of societies gives prime importance to organization and their management. Hence knowledge creation with a focus on social interaction of organization is necessary.
- 2- The knowledge creation in management research through pure empiricism has more or less ignored the social and cultural dimensions of organizations.
- 3- As a result of knowledge which has no social and historical rooting in management research under the umbrella of empiricism has no solution for the problems created by interactions of diverse human beings.
- 4- The management practices which arise as a result of context free knowledge of organization give birth to moral and ethical problems in the organizations.
- 5- The paper calls for relevance of management research with the society and human beings, as this will lead to theories that will give the taste of social and historical rooting of organizations in a particular society.

## LIMITATION

The paper is critically evaluating the consequences of pure empiricist stance, the research is limited to the extent that it has not critically evaluated the pure subjective stance in management research.

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