# Learning from Management Consultants: the Lesson for Management Researchers[1]

STUART MACDONALD & MIKE SIMPSON

ABSTRACT   *The forces pushing management researchers inexorably closer to the managers they study are strong, strengthening and generally welcomed. This paper sees disadvantages in such proximity and common interest. Much of the work of management researchers is not rigorous, not sensible, and not useful, even to the managers it is supposed to serve. While it is probably impractical to suggest that management researchers keep their distance from managers, they may have something of value to learn from management consultants. Consultants are able to work closely with their clients without being overwhelmed by them. This is not to suggest that the efforts of consultants are scholarly, but then they do not pretend to be.*

Keywords: management consultant, management research, managers, management method.

## Introduction

> The more modern thinking about empowerment as autonomy actually fits [this company] very, very well . . . I mean you just can't manage that matrix other than at the local level. The principle by which we try to manage our business was the notion of global localisation. Or was it local globalisation? [Interview with senior manager]

Though reluctant to admit it, managers are often quite baffled by modern management methods. Simply to blame those who peddle the current profusion of methods would be disingenuous. The role of the manager itself has changed in that expectations of what managers can achieve have increased enormously. Managers are no longer regarded as resourceful individuals coping as best they can with different situations as they arise in a myriad of circumstances. *Ad hoc* is now inadequate. Rather, they are seen, and certainly see themselves, as a cadre commissioned to lead. Their mission is improvement in the performance of organisations. Missions of such importance require method. To be sure, most of this

method emanates from management researchers and from management consultants.

In selling his method to the manager, the management consultant requires all the skill and guile of the salesman and missionary. In a complex transaction, the consultant cannot afford to leave the client feeling confused and foolish. The management researcher, however, has a different agenda, gaining much from mere association with the manager. However, it is this same proximity that seems to bring dismay to the manager and discredit to the management researcher. This paper argues that, in determining the nature of the relationship with the manager, the management researcher may have something to learn from the management consultant.

## The Age of Management

Management researchers, management consultants and managers themselves have done their share to cultivate what has become little less than the cult of management, the notion that everything can and should be managed, that most problems can be solved with more and better management, and that these problems are sufficiently generic to be tackled by the same management methods. They have been encouraged by political insistence and social acceptance that the market works. Once it is conceded that the unfettered market assures the best allocation of resources, it follows that those who are most adept at interpreting and responding to the demands of the market are themselves in demand. Thus, the more that policy is allowed to be inferior in the allocation of resources, and the more that organisations are market-led rather than driven by technology or by anything else, and the more that internal markets are created where no markets previously existed, and the more that notions of getting close to the customer prevail, the more power is placed in the hands of the manager. The greater the importance the market is allowed to have, the greater the importance of the manager.

Strategy in particular, and change issues in general, were once redolent with the primitive terms of battle. Modern management now places more emphasis on planning and presentation than on testosterone. Presentation of what the manager does as considered method rather than inspired determination is crucial: the dynamic chief executive implementing sweeping changes must not be confused with the tyrannical mill owner. This would be politically and socially unacceptable even in the manufacturing sector, and would be seen as completely inappropriate elsewhere in the economy. Neither the primary sector, with its hierarchical tradition, nor the vast service sector, with its very different bureaucratic tradition, would accept the manager as mill owner. The manager of management research is much more palatable. More recently, it has come to be accepted that the public sector, and even government itself, has as much to gain as manufacturing industry from the application of management method.

New management methods do not emerge gradually with growth in knowledge provided by cumulative academic research and the experience of consultants. They surge forth in great waves of fad and fashion. Management research, unlike most academic research, is little concerned with detail. It focuses firmly on what are perceived to be generic issues and it searches for sweeping solutions. The formulaic fix is directed towards radical improvement, not incremental. Thus, the caution and caveat normally associated with academic research seems inappropriate, as

does the moderation which usually accompanies academic argument. Management research is redolent with hyperbole. It is also distinguished by its own vocabulary and by a tortuous use of English, both of which mystify and exclude outsiders, as, indeed, they are intended to do. Exclusion leads to ridicule of what is not understood and to the isolation of management research from external influence. What is less obvious is that both the logic and language of management research also protect it from criticism from within. Peer review in management research is assessment by those who accept the logic and speak the language.

Academic research is often regarded as providing the intellectual underpinning for practitioners. One consequence is debate, and often dispute, between theory and practice. It is all too easy to assume that this general model applies to the relationship between management research and both managers and consultants, especially when researchers do their best to encourage such an assumption. Yet, the model does not fit. Theory and practice cannot be neatly separated in management; management researchers must relate to managers. That their relationship has become very close is presented as a strength of management research. It may actually be a fundamental weakness. Managers, consultants and management research itself would probably benefit from an increase in the distance between management research and managers.

## Management Consultants

The traditional distinction between management consultancy and management research is that the former addresses specific issues for a specific client while the latter investigates broader, often more basic issues for a much wider audience. Conventionally, the one produces a report for a customer, and the other a publication for the world. Growing reliance on market forces to decide what research is performed has blurred the distinction in all academic areas between the academic and the consultant, a confusion made worse by the encouragement universities now give their academics to undertake consultancy in order to demonstrate how useful is academic endeavour and to defray university costs.[2] Management researchers are now particularly unlikely to perceive much distinction. Certainly, the easy assumption that the product of consultancy work is less adventurous and less rigorous than the product of management research is no longer justified: some of the most impressive publications are produced by consultants, some of the least by management academics. In part this is explained by the new efficiency expected of academic research, which has encouraged the creation of research businesses in which senior academics attract the funding and junior academics do the research. Clients of consultants are intolerant of such division of labour: users of management research are still generally unaware that it is often a factory product.

While management researchers often turn their hand to consultancy—to earn money and credibility—their consultancy efforts are usually spin-offs from their research activities. They are consultants on the side, not academics on the side. Consequently, they do not generally engage in the complex transactions with clients which occupy so much of the time and effort of management consultants. Distance from managers is not determined by the sort of transaction with clients so fundamental to the consultant's work, and, indeed, there is little appreciation of the importance of such a transaction in determining distance from managers.

Between researcher and consultant there is no transaction; the two may borrow ideas from each other, but there the relationship ends.[3]

Many organisations in both the public and the private sector—certainly most large organisations—make use of external management consultants at some time.[4] Some call in external consultants only occasionally, when there is a particularly pressing problem or when internal consultants cannot cope:[5] others may make as much use of consultants as they do of their own employees. Some organisations nearly always resort to the same consultancy firm: others put jobs to tender, attempt to match the speciality of the consultant to the particular task, or deliberately employ a variety of consultants. The consultant may be called in only as a last resort: he may be used as a matter of routine. He may be a specialist: or he may be a generalist. He may work for a few days with an organisation, or for years on end. He may work as an individual, or as part of a team.

Management consultants have certainly flourished in the Age of Management. Their books fill the airport bookshops and the gurus drawn from their ranks can charge vast fees. They are often accused of sowing the seeds of confusion amongst managers. No doubt they have sown their share, but the accusations stem largely from a misunderstanding of how consultants work. This misunderstanding is evident in strategy and policy, which depicts a delightfully simple world in which managers perceive problems and call in consultants to solve them.[6] A moment's reflection reveals that managers cannot know what they do not know, nor can they know what consultants do know: a complex information transaction lies behind acquiring and using the ideas of management consultants.

The transaction between client and consultant is an information transaction and the characteristics of information provide an essential framework for understanding what is going on. Information is an odd sort of good, quite unlike any other economic good.[7] Its awkward characteristics pose particular problems for market transactions in information. The organisation can be an efficient information organism when dealing with internal information, the sort with which it is familiar and that supports what the organisation is already doing. But for change, for improvement, the organisation is likely to require a contribution of information from beyond its own boundaries. There its own information systems do not operate and the market is ill-equipped to deal with information. If the market is to work at all, consideration must be given to the characteristics of information. This the consultant does. Management researchers, confident in their conviction that the market works, do not.

The consultant cannot simply set out his stall and allow managers to peruse the goods he has for sale. When information is displayed, it is given away. How, then, does the consultant find customers? As the client cannot know what he does not know, nor what the consultant does know, the purchaser of information is in a poor position to initiate the transaction. This is why consultants are extremely active in marketing their services, and why governments can resort to market failure justification in their encouragement of the use of consultants. Attempts by clients to cope with this fundamental uncertainty may help explain why so many relationships with consultants are long standing, or stimulated by the experience of other clients.[8] Literally ignorant, the client is heavily dependent on features of the transaction to instruct the consultant, features such as trust and the past performance or reputation of the consultant. Yet, it is still a common perception among clients that they are simply buying the information they need, much as they might buy a new machine for the shopfloor.

It is clearer to the external consultant than to the client that major effort is required to manage the transaction between the two. Most organisations hiring consultants are more aware that something is wrong than of precisely what is wrong. A major part of the consultant's job is often to formulate the client's problem so that a solution may be sought. The cynic would claim, perhaps with some justification, that the consultant is anxious to convert the client's problem into one for which he already has an answer. But there is no point delivering the right solution to the wrong problem. Many consultants go to great lengths to make themselves as familiar as possible with their client's organisation in general, and with their client's view of the project in particular. For the cynic this process is one of discovering what it is the client wants the consultant to say.[9] It is usually necessary for consultants to devote considerable resources to ensuring that the client's actual problem is the same as his perceived problem.[10] For example, headhunters seeking key employees are as rigorous in their investigation of clients as of candidates.[11] More fundamentally, though, it is essential that the consultant discover what information the client can use. He can do this only by careful, and often lengthy, investigation of what information is already inside the organisation. One consequence is that consultants, abetted by clients anxious that their consultants 'get up to speed' as soon as possible, much prefer repeat business from the same clients.

Organisations hire external consultants because they need the consultants' resources and do not have equivalent resources within their boundaries. Sometimes this is because it would be uneconomic to maintain such resources internally for only occasional use: more often it is because these resources can exist only outside the organisation. Impartial advice is a classic example.[12] However, the consultant's information must be not only acquired, but also used within the organisation. Consultants are well aware that there is no point in providing clients with information they cannot use.[13] Information which cannot be used cannot be valued. The provision of such information is, at the most basic level, bad for business. It is also bad business in the sense that the expertise of the consultant lies not only in unearthing and supplying information, but also in ensuring that the information can be used by the client. This must be information that is new to the client, and yet still sufficiently recognisable for the client to know what to do with it. Basically, the consultant's information must fit with the information already in use inside the client's organisation. Information which does not fit is rejected much as the inventions of independent inventors can be summarily rejected by companies.[14] The not-invented-here syndrome arises, in large part, from the failure of those outside the organisation to appreciate circumstances inside the organisation. Consultants are well aware of this syndrome.

Many management researchers are also part-time consultants, but in its relationship with managers, management research is very different from management consultancy. While the consultant, providing specific advice to a single client, is always conscious of the importance of the relationship with the client, the management researcher, more concerned with general issues and addressing a much wider audience, feels simply that the relationship should be as close as possible. The consultant needs to be close enough to effect crucial information transactions, generally involving the exchange of tacit information. He must discover what the client needs to know, and what ideas the client can implement. A degree of familiarity and cordiality also makes business more pleasant and increases the chances of repeat business. Too distant a relationship makes discovery

hard and the consultant ineffective, but too close a relationship reduces objectivity and the advantages of the consultant being external to the organisation. Finding the right distance is difficult, and it is a difficulty scarcely appreciated by management researchers, despite their own consultancy experience. In their eagerness to demonstrate the usefulness of management studies in general, and management research in particular, they have sought the closest possible relationship with managers.

## Management Research

In 1993, the Economic and Social Research Council, the government funding body for academic research in the social sciences in the UK, took the unusual step of commissioning an inquiry into the quality of management research.[15]

> Much management research has lacked the rigour and critical reflection more common in other Social Science disciplines. Studies have tended to be atheoretical and non-comparative. Case study research has predominated with inadequate emphasis on developing long-term and cross-sectional data.[16]

That the ESRC should have instigated an inquiry into the quality of management research at all is rather more significant than the report which the Commission eventually produced. It is always difficult for any large group, no matter how worthy its membership, to be incisive in its findings. This group, consisting not of consultants or bureaucrats but of leading management researchers, was no exception. For example, in its confusion, the report concludes that:

> Research can and does contribute to today's problems, but it has a greater contribution to make: it should also contribute to tomorrow's problems.[17]

It has been observed that the problems afflicting management research are more evident in the style and content of the report than in its observations, conclusions and recommendations.[18] This is apparent in the report's identification of three themes underlying the problems of management research: sustaining excellence; improving quality; and building partnerships between researchers and user communities. In the context of the desperate circumstances in which the ESRC had taken the extraordinary step of commissioning the report, these themes are curious. Far fewer research proposals in management than in any of the other social sciences were judged worthy of ESRC funding; of 778 research awards, just 19 were in management studies.[19] Yet the Commission persisted in thinking in terms of sustaining excellence, making quality higher still, and transferring the results of management research to those who would reap the greatest benefits. It was the ESRC, not the Commission, which undertook its own research and discovered that the referees who held the lowest opinion of management research, and who therefore rejected most research proposals, came not from the other social sciences, and particularly economics, as had commonly been assumed by management academics, but from management studies itself. That their own colleagues thought least of the quality of management research, and were happily stabbing each other in the back, would seem to be an important discovery, yet it is not one in which the Commission showed much interest. The Commission could as easily have been inquiring into the superiority of management research as into its

inferiority. Its report displays in microcosm the very real difficulties under which management research labours, and the dangers of absolutely always being positive, constructive and uncritical.

## Characteristics of Management Research

Most academic disciplines would still argue that there is a fundamental and invaluable symbiosis between teaching and research. Research feeds new knowledge from the frontier into teaching; it adds contention and debate to what would otherwise be the tedium of consensus. Teaching forces research to consolidate, to justify and explain its findings, and to place them in a much wider context than that of scholarly journals. The argument for conjunction is no weaker in management studies, and many see it as very much stronger. After all, those who are studied are managers, and those who are taught are largely managers too, or at least aspiring managers. In as much as there is an expectation that management research be useful and applicable, what more obvious place to be useful and applicable than in a class of managers? Thus it is that, perhaps more than in any other academic field, there is in management studies an exceedingly close relationship between teaching and research. Indeed, much of the methodology and many of the techniques of management research—most obviously the case study—are directed more towards the classroom than towards a research audience. Students are expected to learn from real world examples, a characteristic which is not common in other academic areas. At the masters level, management students are typically expected to introduce their own experiences of the real world into the classroom to compare with those brought in by management research.

While many see the intimacy of teaching and research in management studies as a strength of the subject and a further instance of how management research is useful, others argue that such close connection with teaching deprives management research of some of the objectivity and detachment required for quality in academic research. When carried out by untrained students or primarily to satisfy their specific requirements, research may meet not even basic standards of scholarship. When carried out on students, as it often is, management research would seem to put convenience before scholarship. A survey of research findings published in what are generally considered to be leading journals in the field—the *Academy of Management Journal, Administrative Science Quarterly,* the *Journal of Management,* the *Journal of Applied Psychology, Organisational Behaviour,* and *Human Decision Processes*—reveals that about 30% of papers relied solely on student populations.[20]

The peculiar conjunction of teaching and research in management studies presents a further problem. While all academic endeavour in the UK has been subject to increasing public scrutiny over the last decade,[21] management studies has coped particularly badly with performance measures which are markedly different for teaching and research. Teaching quality has been gauged largely by the assessment of procedures: research quality largely by output indicators. In management studies, the contribution of research to teaching does much to boost the quality rating, but the demands of teaching on research do nothing to enhance the indicators of research output. The indicators make no allowance for research being carried out to give students experience, or to provide them with practical examples. The fault lies in the methods of measurement, but these are unlikely to be altered just to accommodate management studies. As these measurements now

determine a large proportion of resource allocation in UK universities, the problem is serious for management studies. Curiously, it has rarely been addressed.

Managers may once have expressed doubts about the value of an MBA, and may still have reservations about the value of a first degree in business, but the ranks of management are now so full of business school graduates that complaint about their quality is understandably muted. It is not apparent that it is in anyone's interest to question the MBA system. Indeed, there is little research on the relationship between the acquisition of an MBA and the ability to manage. Robert Locke, basing his analysis on a comparison of American, German and Japanese experiences, finds no evidence that business schools and graduate management education have contributed to managerial excellence.[22] The reputation of American management preceded the development of MBA programmes and MBAs played a negligible role in the rise of American managerial capitalism in the 1960s. Over the next two decades, MBAs came to constitute an increasingly significant group within the ranks of American managers—and the reputation of American management went into decline. American management methods certainly had an impact on Germany and Japan after the Second World War, but neither has been wholehearted in its adoption of the MBA model for management education.

Whether an MBA makes a better manager is not the point at issue; the MBA has come to be valued less as evidence of superior ability to manage, than as a screening device to aid in the selection and promotion of managers. Of much greater relevance is the impact of the competition among business schools for the custom of those who would acquire an MBA. So relentless is this competition with its league tables of business schools, that there is little opportunity for reflection on the relationship between MBA teaching and management research.[23] With so much research dedicated to efficient teaching, there is little scope for the conflict and criticism which keeps academic research relevant and honest. Moreover, the competitive image required by the business school does not readily accommodate reservation and doubt, especially self-doubt.[24] This has serious implications for the academic reputation of management studies: competitive pressures encourage business schools to promote MBA programmes as their flagships, yet, in research terms, these vessels are suited only to inshore waters and not to deep sea navigation.

Many would argue that management studies is not a discipline, and that its distinctive relationship with what it studies, and particularly with its users, preclude it from ever becoming a proper academic discipline. They would certainly not accept that this relationship lowers the quality of management research, insisting rather that the real world is complex and that no single discipline could possibly provide adequate basis for its understanding. Instead, what is required is the application of knowledge from many disciplines. Management research must be truly multidisciplinary and so, rather than be constrained within a disciplinary boundary of its own creation, it must remain a subject. The variety of academic backgrounds of senior management researchers is ample evidence that the subject's roots are in many disciplines. Others, however, refer to 'management science' and insist that all that distinguishes the subject from other areas of academic endeavour is that it is new. Given time, they argue, it will mature into a discipline as economics did in the late eighteenth century and geography in the nineteenth. These tend to be younger academics, those who are experienced in only management studies, who see the importance and relevance of management

studies as entitling it to the status of discipline, and who feel that their own status is diminished by anything less.[25]

There is almost universal agreement that management studies should be useful to managers.[26] Of course, all academic endeavour aims to be useful—none deliberately sets out to be useless—but most is reconciled to indirect influence and long-term benefit. Management studies is expected to produce very direct and usually very instant benefit for managers. Perhaps more importantly, management studies also expects itself to bring benefits of this sort. This universal expectation that management research be directly and immediately useful imposes a heavy burden on management researchers.[27] Usefulness is a double-edged sword. Certainly, management research does not suffer from the accusation popularly levelled against other academic research—that it is an unworldly and esoteric indulgence—but the penalty for this privilege is that many academics look down on management researchers because they do not have to defend themselves against charges of uselessness. More serious penalties arise from the apparent advantage of management research in having access to sources of funding unavailable to most academic research. Because management research is of value to managers, they may be willing to pay for it. Understandably, this prompts a degree of envy among other academics, the more now that increased workloads have made it impractical to undertake major research without external funding, and that research performance plays such an important part in both promotion criteria and the formulae by which resources are allocated to universities and departments.

Academic research has been exposed to the rigours of market forces in recent years; politicians and administrators are increasingly likely to insist that the market should select what research is worth doing, either by funding it directly or by relying on prominent players in the market to indicate how public funds should be allocated.[28] Again, these changes in the academic environment should very much favour management research. In the sense that management research is relatively well funded they have, but they have also encouraged many in management studies to believe that the quality of their research can be measured entirely by the willingness of external organisations to pay for it. This conviction can be seen in the reluctance of management researchers to enter the competition for public research funds, in their inexperience in justifying their research on any other grounds than market demand, and in the appalling rate of success of their research proposals noted by the ESRC in the UK. But unfamiliarity with the system is not entirely to blame: as long as the system believes that market representatives should play a major part in the allocation of public research funds, it follows that any management research which cannot secure funding in the market must be second-rate and thus undeserving of public funding. A further consequence is that many universities feel that they have a profit centre in management studies generally and in management research particularly. Of all research, that in management studies can be most relied upon to help reduce university deficits. The consequence is that management researchers are under enormous pressure to accept the considerable external funding available for their research, and not to question either the nature of the research or the requirements of the funders.

It is hard to justify the expenditure of the organisation's resources on management research, especially financial resources, in any other terms than definite and direct benefit to the organisation. Research which cannot promise such benefits—and it is questionable whether academic research should—is difficult to support. The result is that organisations deprive themselves of basic

academic research and academics have little incentive to conduct research of this sort. Surprisingly, public funders of management research do not try to compensate for this market failure. Quite the reverse: increasingly, they look to senior managers to signal which research is worth funding and which is not. It is perhaps a reflection of how unfamiliar are managers with academic research that they have generally been slow to explain that public funds, and not their own, must support basic research. The result is that public funders of management research, anxious to demonstrate that every research penny is responsibly spent, have directed their resources towards the most applied of research, that which can be guaranteed to bring immediate benefits for organisations. The irony is that what little basic research is still performed in management studies tends not to be supported by public funds at all, but by industry itself, usually by very senior managers in large organisations, individuals who require a wide perspective, who are expected to take a long-term view, and who do not have to justify their expenditure in terms of immediate and definite gains. The nearest equivalent is the support bestowed on authors and artists by aristocratic patrons in the eighteenth century. It is unsatisfactory that so much of the most basic research in management is dependent on such personal whim.

## Closing the Gap

There is a further ingredient that has added to this blurring in management studies. It is now incumbent on all academic researchers to disseminate their findings as widely as possible in order to justify their activities. Results must be made not just available to users, but very evidently available. A track record of high profile output is required for further funding input. In other academic areas, this may mean no more than attracting media interest: in management studies, it is more likely to mean attempting the transition from part-time consultant—providing information specific to the requirements of individual organisations—to guru—offering universal panaceas to all organisations. Under any circumstances, it would be difficult for management researchers to resist the fame and fortune which attaches to guru status:[29] when these are also regarded as major indicators of the worth and effectiveness of academic research, resistance seems pointless.[30]

This is not the place to consider the costs and benefits of guru influence on organisational behaviour and performance, but it is appropriate to observe that the influence is both pervasive and profound. It is also legitimate to speculate that the enthusiasm with which populist solutions have been adopted by managers might have been less fickle and more tempered had management research been able to maintain some detachment from these solutions. If any group has a responsibility to offer critical appraisal of the generic remedies offered to managers, and subsequently by managers, it is management researchers. Because they have absolved themselves of this responsibility, much of the considerable doubt that is widely felt about the quality of solutions offered by the gurus also attaches to the quality of management research. The following is from one of the leading academic journals in management studies:

> The guru of action learning is Professor R. Revans. Revans has been an Olympic Long jumper, a Cambridge physicist and is a follower of the Bible . . . he initially worked for the Essex Education Service, bridging mind and body in the examination of nurse recruitment, and then in the mining industry noting

the duality between matter (physical achievement) and spirit (concept attainment). . . . There is within action learning a desire to move on the higher plains. As managers are self-developed they reflect more and are challenged to take a broader view of the world, seeking enlightenment or a 'oneness' which denotes not only self-awareness but union with all living things.[31]

Twenty years ago, one manager revealed nicely the culture gap which then existed between the manager and the management researcher.

They tell me you academics write two or three papers a year. How many thousand words is that? I must write that much in a week. [Senior manager from industry]

Such a gap still exists between most academic research and its subjects; it is simply a fact of life. It is also a necessary one. Most academics seek to understand what they study, but to avoid identifying with it. The gap makes understanding the more difficult, but it permits detachment. Management research has sought to close the gap altogether, and to the extent that it has succeeded, it has sacrificed this detachment. Moreover, the gap has been closed not by the manager moving as far towards the academic as the academic moves towards the manager. The gap has been closed entirely by concessions from management studies. Consequently, management academics have adopted many of the cultural characteristics of managers, and not all of these are appropriate to research. For example, it is a feature of most organisations of any size that the more senior a manager, the less he should be bothered by detail. The executive summary is to capture the major points; the rest should be the concern of underlings. Research results directed towards senior management, as many are, risk being stripped of content and argument. Thus is quality placed in jeopardy. Not much of academic worth survives a filtering process which is little different from that which provides managers with 'the latest management thinking in just 16 pages a month',[32] or which 'packs into just 8 easily absorbed pages, a mountain of business wisdom distilled down to just the purest essence', guaranteed to contain 'not a single untested academic theory'.[33] Yet, management researchers have shown little reluctance to present their results in the form managers expect. They have not seen fit to observe that if managers wish maximum benefit from management research, they must at least read it. Much less has it been suggested that managers must take at least some responsibility for understanding what they read.

There are rules in the conduct of research and it is a fundamental concern of all academic disciplines that these rules be strictly obeyed. Sometimes the rules are explicit, as are those against plagiarism, though even this very obvious rule is sometimes flouted in management research, perhaps in emulation of the corporate culture which permits what Brian Martin calls 'institutional plagiarism'—senior managers claiming authorship of material written by their juniors.[34] Much more often, the rules are tacit, demanding of researchers exacting standards of trust and integrity. There is sometimes little understanding among management researchers of the importance of obeying these tacit rules. For example, there are many occasions in management research where results could be tested by repeating experiments: there is almost no interest in doing this. A survey of 1120 papers published in marketing journals discovered no replications, and only 20 extensions of other work; of these 20, only three confirmed the original results.[35] In the

absence of such testing, it is hardly surprising that management research is characterised by fad and fashion, and by consequent resistance to innovative research and to research results which are in any way deviant.[36] The equivalent in organisational culture is working as a team, marching to the same drumbeat, singing from the same hymnsheet, all pulling together. For business schools and individual academics alike, to be out of fashion is to be uncompetitive.[37]

There is, of course, much more management research in which the nature of the investigation allows nothing like an experiment which might be repeated by other researchers.[38] Research methods are often inherently subjective, demanding interpretation of both the information going into research and that coming out. This is not to suggest that the results of management research are deliberately falsified.[39] Rarely is there a conscious attempt to distort results; rather there is accommodation. Thus, for example, when a source is quoted in, say, a political science paper, the quotation must be strictly accurate: in management research the rules of minute taking in the boardroom may prevail, and what is quoted is what should have been said rather than what was said. It is but a small step from here to quoting what the researcher would like to have been said. Similarly, because organisations being studied do not care to reveal their failures and it is felt that the audience for management research wants to learn from the success of others, there is very little management research on failure. Over time, a research tradition has developed in which failure is largely ignored, no matter how staring.

More serious still in their impact on the quality of management research are the demands of access to the organisations being studied. Most management research, being very much concerned with the real world, tends towards the empirical. Thus, access to organisations is required. Consultants deal with this matter as part of the initial transaction with clients, but not management researchers.

> . . . in Britain the game that's played is essentially a networking game. They allow access in a small node or corner of the network, and then you get tested out on that node. And if you are deemed acceptable on whatever criteria, then you pass on to the next part of the node and then the next part.[40]

Lengthy fieldwork is expensive for organisations and researchers alike and there is common interest in keeping it as brief and unobtrusive as possible. The result can be depressing: for instance, it is not unusual to find papers based on arguments based on case studies of vast and complex organisations based on a single interview in each organisation. This is the equivalent of the historian reading a single document, or the archaeologist digging a single hole, yet custom has made minimal fieldwork acceptable practice in management research.

> As one of our first research projects, we are carrying out research into the importance of company philosophy and mission as a tool of management. . . . Can you help? Can you send us any statement that your company has made about its purpose, objectives, values or philosophy? [Extract from circular letter sent to companies by management researchers]

Other difficulties associated with gaining access also threaten research quality. While individual managers are often very generous in the time they make available to management researchers, the system itself may be less accommodating. Obvious difficulties, such as ensuring that publications from fieldwork contain no material

that is inaccurate or confidential, can easily be overcome, but the less obvious are more intractable. Basically, the academic is supplicant in the manager's world, often feeling he must ask nicely if he is to receive any information at all and, above all, retain the access upon which his research depends. To lose access is not only to forgo further research information; it also imperils access to other organisations, further research funding, promotion, consultancy, positions on advisory committees, career and job.

> We have co-operated with you in the past in what we believe has been a constructive relationship but this latest paper is both inaccurate and wholly unacceptable and will undoubtedly destroy that relationship. [Company reaction to draft paper]

In these circumstances, it is understandable that the management researcher is often less anxious to ask searching questions than the sort managers most wish to answer. Compounding this tendency to accept what is given is the relative ease with which such tidy information can be used in research output. It is very much more difficult to convey the messiness and uncertainty of reality, and certainly to shape an argument from this reality that will be of direct and immediate use to managers.

It is not so very long since management researchers were as likely to publish in the journals of their core disciplines as in management journals. Now that so many have been brought up in a purely management tradition, they tend to publish in management journals, of which there are a great many. Thus, their own perception of research quality is increasingly based on comparison of management publications with other management publications rather than with publications in academic areas which are not subject to the same range of pressures—the demands of managers, the profit expectations of universities, the research requirements of teaching, and so on. Such pressures may compromise academic standards, and certainly peer review is more promised than practised.[41]

> Thank you for contacting us about the conference. Thank you for your abstract and your cheque. All abstracts are, of course, accepted. Those of you who submitted papers for the refereed track, this is now under way. However all papers are accepted for the Conference in any event. [Letter from management conference organiser to participant]

Those management journals which value their reputation resort to exhaustive submission procedures, with the result that the style and form of a paper may become rather more important than its content.[42] The advice of one senior management researcher to his juniors is:

1. select the journal in which you wish to publish
2. determine from papers published in the journal the consensus opinion on your area of research
3. do the research
4. extract from the research those parts compatible with the consensus
5. write the paper and submit.

Such a procedure is unlikely to lead to the publication of many new ideas in management journals, a tendency exacerbated by many of the other constraints

placed on management research, and probably exacerbated further by the proclivity of many management journals to rely on appointed panels of established experts to referee papers. Publications in management research have a pronounced tendency to agree with previous publications.[43] An analysis of some four decades of publications in industrial and organisational psychology found that some 5 or 6% were primarily practical, and a further 15% primarily theoretical.

> What about the rest? They can best be characterized as building upon the work of others without particular regard to either theory or practice. The problem with many of our journals, then, may not be that they are too theoretical, but that they are not theoretical enough, and are content to publish papers that make only the most incremental contributions.[44]

There is also some evidence that the authorship of articles submitted to management journals is rather more important than their content.[45] The suggestion is of a subject very uncertain of itself; so much so, in fact, that the more the quality of its research is doubted, the more it will deny any shortcomings. The pretence has serious implications, for it is fundamental to all academic research that it be exposed to criticism. In management research, criticism is not welcome. Many management researchers are simply not familiar with the harsh reality of criticism so fundamental to academic discipline.

> First I would like to say how much I appreciate that you have taken the time to read and comment on my paper. In the five years I have worked at the [research] Centre this is the first time that anyone has commented in any detail on anything I have written ... However, I feel your remarks are expressed in a very dogmatic way, and that a few instances of 'in my opinion', 'my view is', 'such and such may be so' would have made a great difference to the general tone of what you say. ... None of these remarks served any function in terms of making me more attentive to your criticisms. In fact, had you been an unknown reviewer I might well have been so annoyed and upset as to disregard their content. I should certainly have complained in the strongest terms to the editor. [Response from management researcher]

And thus it is that while management researchers are uncomfortable with academic criticism that is in any way personal and specific, they are quite ready to concede collectively and anonymously that one of the most fundamental weaknesses of management research is quite simply poor scholarship.[46] The connection remains to be made.

## Thoughts on Solutions

Management researchers are constantly being exhorted to produce research that is readily understood by managers. Managers insist that they have neither the time nor the inclination to wade through academic papers in the hope of finding something that might be of value to them. In that many management publications contain little of value anyway, the search for nuggets is the more frustrating. The problems of disseminating the results of academic research to non-academic

audiences are not peculiar to management studies. Elsewhere they are taken seriously. For example, it is common to find whole courses in the philosophy of science on the transfer of research information to a variety of audiences. The difficulties are acknowledged and the problems addressed. In management studies, the only problem that is acknowledged is that managers are too busy to bother with academic meanderings and must be presented with no more than the nub of any issue. With great skill, some academic research can be condensed in this way without losing its message. Much cannot; much is just far too complex to fit into executive summaries, bullet points, and flow diagrams and text brief enough for overhead transparencies. Managers should not expect to receive its message without putting some time and effort into the exercise.

The universal expectation that the management researcher should always accommodate the manager is fundamentally flawed: it leads to the manager encountering only that research which can be easily summarised, and to his continuing inability to master anything more complex. It also leads to the manager being treated as a half-wit. For example, in advising academics how to present their results to business, the ESRC suggests that such a tedious title as 'A Postfordist analysis of labour relations in Bradford's clothing industry, 1963–1992' should be changed to the more expeditious 'Future of labour relations in the clothing industry'.[47] It is not the inevitable and unenviable lot of academics to simplify their research into oblivion. Some issues should not be rendered into intellectual baby food by straining them of all meat. Managers must be educated and trained in how to chew, how to appreciate flavour, even how to cope with bouts of indigestion, not conditioned to a career of effortless consumption.

Management researchers are generally unaware of the efforts which management consultants put into transactions with their clients. There is no academic equivalent and the academic's consultancy is usually a simple spin-off from specific research. Academic research is redolent with convention and tacit understanding, but these are familiar only within the academic world and are unknown to outsiders. Where academic research must meet the outside world— and management research must—it must explain itself to that world. This is where management researchers have much to learn from the transaction between consultant and client. The nature of the good being sold makes a simple relationship between buyer and seller quite impossible. It requires a complex transaction into which the consultant puts a great deal of effort. This is not to argue that management researchers should engage in similar transactions with managers. It is to say that close relationships with managers have done grave damage to management research and, indirectly, to the managers and consultants who need its results. If management researchers are to work hand in glove with mangers, they should be aware that they are not simply gathering information; a transaction is taking place, a very intricate transaction, and substantial effort must go into effecting it. The transaction between researcher and manager may well be more difficult than that between consultant and client in that research benefits tend to be indirect, long-term and, above all, uncertain, and in that there are other customers and motivations for the research. This is all the more reason for dedicating the effort. Without this effort, without even appreciation that a transaction must take place, management research has allowed a professional relationship to descend into intimacy. It now lives with the consequences.

## Notes and References

1.  This paper is based on a report published as Stuart Macdonald and Mike Simpson, 'The quality of management research: implications for industry' in the National Board of Employment, Education and Training/Australian Research Council, Management Research in Australia, *Report of the Steering Committee of the Strategic Review of Management*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1997, pp. 107–25. Another paper derived from the same report is Stuart Macdonald and Mike Simpson, 'Keeping a healthy distance: management research and managers', *Clinician in Management*, 7, 1998, pp. 221–33.

2.  Stephen Hill, 'Moving boundaries: transformations of the interface between academic institutions and their environments' in Irmline Veit-Brause (ed.), *Science Policy and the Case for Realignment between the University's own Values and the Society's Real Needs*, Deakin University Sciences in Society Centre, Geelong, 1995.

3.  R. J. Ormerod, 'Combining management consultancy and research', *Omega*, 24, 1, 1996, pp. 1–12.

4.  MORI, *A Survey of Business*, Department of Trade and Industry, London, March 1993.

5.  See Fritz Steele, *The Role of the Internal Consultant*, Van Nostrand Reinhold, New York, 1982.

6.  The Consultancy Initiatives, run by the Department of Trade and Industry, are the best known examples in the UK. See also PERA International and Salford University Business Services, *A Survey of Quality Consultancy Scheme Clients*, Department of Trade and Industry, London, 1992. This study attributes improvements so great to information from management consultants that its sponsor, the Design Council, has been reluctant to make use of the data.

7.  See, for example, K. J. Arrow, *The Limits of Organization*, Norton, New York, 1974; J. E. Stiglitz, 'Learning to learn, localized learning and technological progress', in P. Dasgupta and P. Stoneman (eds), *Economic Policy and Technological Performance*, CUP, Cambridge, 1987; idem, 'Information and economic analysis: a perspective', Economic Journal, 95, 1980, supplement pp. 21–41; Don Lamberton, 'The economics of information and organisation', *Annual Review of Information Science and Technology*, 19, 1984, pp. 3–30.

8.  MORI, *Pre-campaign Tracking. DTI's Enterprise Initiative Campaign*, report for DTI, January 1988.

9.  Wilda Newman, 'The use of consultants in information systems', *Bulletin of the American Society for Information Science*, 17, 2, 1991, pp. 23–25.

10. This may actually be a process of negotiation. See Colin Eden and David Sims, 'On the nature of problems in consulting practice', *Omega*, 7, 2, 1979, pp. 119–27.

11. Stuart Macdonald, 'Headhunting in high technology', *Technovation*, 4, 1986, pp. 233–45.

12. Sam Barcus, 'The decision to hire a consultant: make it a successful one', *Business Forum*, 14, 1, 1988/89, pp. 48–50.

13. Gordon Lippitt and Ronald Lippitt, *The Consulting Process in Action*, University Associates, San Diego, 1986.

14. Stuart Macdonald, 'The patent system and the individual inventor', *European Intellectual Property Review*, 5, 6, 1983, pp. 154–59.

15. Commission on Management Research, *Building Partnerships: Enhancing the Quality of Management Research*, ESRC, Swindon, January 1994.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

18. See for example, Stuart Macdonald, 'Buzz words, muddled minds', *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 18 February 1994, p. 12.

19. Simon Caulkin, 'Research into research', *Observer*, 27 February 1994, p. 8.

20. Raymond Hubbard and R. Murray Lindsay, 'Caveat emptor applies to the consumption of published empirical research results, too', *Management Research News*, 18, 10/11, 1995, pp. 49–55.

21. See Martin Parker and David Jary, 'The McUniversity: organization, management and academic subjectivity', *Organization*, 2, 2, 1995, pp. 319–38.

22.  R. Locke, *The Introduction of Business Schools in the United Kingdom: Confusing Historical for Functional Events*, keynote address, British Academy of Management Conference, Aston University, 17 September 1996.

23.  See 'The flawed education of the European businessman', *Economist*, 4 June 1994, pp. 89–90.

24.  See Tony Oulton, 'Management peer research for information', *Management Decision*, 33, 5, 1995, pp. 63–68.

25.  *Cf.* Chester Newland, 'A field of strangers in search of a discipline: separatism of public management research from public administration', *Public Administration Review*, 54, 5, 1994, pp. 486–88.

26.  See for example, John McCallum, 'The role of management research', *Business Quarterly*, 59, 2, 1994, pp. 45–50.

27.  Angelo DeNisi, 'Is relevant research irrelevant?: On evaluating the contribution of research to management practice', *Journal of Managerial Issues*, 6, 2, 1994, pp. 145–59.

28.  *Realising our Potential. A Strategy for Science, Engineering and Technology*, Cm. 2250, HMSO, London, 1993.

29.  Andrzej Huczynski, *Management Gurus. What Makes Them and How to Become One*, Thomson, London, 1996; John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, 'Gurus of gobbledygook', *Sunday Telegraph Review*, 27 October 1996, pp. 1–2.

30.  Colin Eden and Chris Huxham, 'Action research for management research', *British Journal of Management*, 7, 1996, pp. 75–86.

31.  Hugh McLoughlin and Richard Thorpe, 'Action learning – a paradigm in emergence: the problems facing a challenge to traditional management education and development', *British Journal of Management*, 4, 1993, pp. 19–27 (pp. 23–25).

32.  *Bulletpoint*, 34, 1996, p. 1.

33.  Advertisement for *Business Now, Independent*, supplement, 29 October 1994, p. 23.

34.  Brian Martin, 'Plagiarism: a misplaced emphasis', *Journal of Information Ethics*, 3, 2, 1994, pp. 36–47.

35.  Raymond Hubbard and J. Scott Armstrong, 'Replications and extensions in marketing: rarely published, but quite contrary', *International Journal of Marketing*, 11, 1994, pp. 233–48.

36.  J. Scott Armstrong, 'Why management fads persist: on experience curves, the BCG matrix, escalation bias, and such', Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania, 30 July 1994, mimeo.

37.  Eric Abrahamson, 'Management fashion', *Academy of Management Review*, 21, 1, 1996, pp. 254–85.

38.  'Quacks and coaches', *Economist*, 17 April 1993, p. 81.

39.  See Albert Jonsen (ed.), *Honesty in Learning, Fairness in Teaching*, Macy Foundation, New York, 1995.

40.  Andrew Pettigrew, 'Contextualist research: a natural way to link theory and practice', in Edward Lawler *et al.* (eds), *Doing Research that is Useful for Theory and Practice*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 1985, p. 264.

41.  Hubbard and Lindsay, *op. cit.*

42.  Tony Watson, 'Managing, crafting and researching: words, skill and imagination in shaping management research', *British Journal of Management*, 5, special issue, 1994, pp. S77-S87.

43.  See J. Scott Armstrong, 'Peer review of scientific papers', *Journal of Biological Response Modifiers*, 3, 1984, pp. 10–14.

44.  DeNisi, *op. cit.*, p. 157.

45.  Armstrong, *op. cit.*, 1984.

46.  See for example, Archie Carroll, 'Social issues in management research', *Business and Society*, 33, 1, 1994, pp. 5–29.

47.  ESRC, *Writing for Business. How to Write Reports that Capture the Attention of Business*, Swindon, 1995.