

BOOK REVIEW

Management Studies in Crisis: Fraud, Deception and Meaningless Research by Dennis Tourish (2019) pp.x+304, £58 (hardback) Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, ISBN: 9781108480475

With considerable flair and lightness of touch, Dennis Tourish has written a devastating broadside against the business school, a scathing record of the missteps and misdeeds of management research from its inception to the present day. The book offers a multi-pronged attack on poor academic practices, covering everything from Frederick Taylor's flagrant lies about scientific management to statistical jiggery-pokery in contemporary leadership theory. What's more, it provides an object lesson in how we might create a better kind of business school, one in which we no longer churn out pointless papers in academic journals that no one ever reads. At its core, the book analyses why a great deal of management research is rubbish and what we can do about it – with the ultimate aim of bringing some 'zest and purpose' (p.234) into academic life.

Tourish tells us that his book emerged from his own growing sense of disquiet about the state of management research, especially 'the unreadability of our journals, the triviality of the topics that they mostly address, and the importance of the many issues that they ignore' (p.1). Part of the reason why so much business scholarship is junk, Tourish suggests, is because university research audits encourage scholars to focus on quantity over quality. In effect, reward structures in the business school incentivize bad academic habits, such as the relentless pursuit of quick and dirty publications. As a result, we now live in a world in which career success is measured by journal rankings and citation indices instead of intellectual insight or practical relevance. The growth of audit culture within higher education has thus created a monster, a 'beast of measurement [that] is always hungry' (p.35).

In this environment, top-ranked journals only exacerbate the problem. Consider how premier outlets emphasize 'theory building' in academic papers, which encourages authors to transform simple ideas into gratuitously complex arguments. By using abstruse language to describe ordinary phenomena, academics end up producing work that is full of sound and fury yet ultimately signifies nothing – apart from another notch on the academic bedpost for published authors. Tourish singles out a few examples of overly abstract writing and tries his best to translate them into plain English. As he does so, we can't help but feel we are watching a kind of magic trick: we think we see a heavy-duty theory before our eyes only for it to vanish in a puff of smoke. But Tourish's primary aim is not to name and shame bad academic writers. Rather, it is to invite us to 'write about management and organisations with less obscure theorizing . . . and with a little more humour, curiosity, and passion' (p.160). It is an invitation that Tourish himself lives up to throughout the book.

Bland, jargon-infested academic writing isn't the only offence Tourish is concerned with. He also wants to expose altogether more nefarious practices in the business school. From the very beginning, management research has been plagued by exaggerated findings based on flimsy or fabricated evidence. To illustrate this point, Tourish turns his attention to Frederick Taylor and Elton Mayo, the progenitors of contemporary management theory. Both published influential books in the first half of the twentieth century. The tone is similar to Stewart's brutal exposé in *The Management Myth* (2009), portraying Taylor and Mayo as snake-oil salesmen who have no qualms about playing fast and loose with the facts. The key lesson that Tourish draws from these theorists is that we ought to be 'more sceptical of big claims and question the data on which they purport to rest' (p.23).

This message holds just as true today as it did then. In the most enjoyable chapters in the book, Tourish explores the various ways in which business school scholars continue to cut corners in their research. Chapter 4 spotlights questionable research practices in positivist management

studies that serve to inflate the statistical significance of a piece of work, such as p-hacking and HARKing. By engaging in scholarly sleights-of-hand, academics make their research findings seem more robust – and therefore more publishable – than they really are.

Chapter 5 extends this analysis by looking at some of the worst offenders in the business school, including James Hunton (37 journal article retractions to his name), Ulrich Lichtenthaler (16 retractions) and Frederick Walumbwa (7 retractions). What is shocking is not so much that academics are willing to commit research misconduct to pursue career goals, but that they sometimes get away with it. For example, Lichtenthaler resigned from his chair at the University of Mannheim in 2015 during the retraction scandal, only to take up a new position as a professor at the International School of Management in Cologne a few years later. It seems that the price to pay for egregious research malpractice is very low indeed – and maybe a gamble worth taking for the unscrupulous.

The curious case of Frederick Walumbwa is explored in further detail in chapter 7. Here, Tourish wants to show that there is a deeper rot in management studies beyond a handful of retracted articles. In particular, the concept of authentic leadership exemplifies everything that is wrong with business school research – namely ‘feeble theorising, shoddy empirical work, questionable research practices, a bias for positive results and dubious statistical analysis’ (p.162). Once more we encounter a depressing reluctance among powerful institutional gatekeepers to hold fraudsters and phonies to account. Take the *Journal of Management*, which decided not to retract one of Walumbwa’s suspect yet well-cited articles purporting to validate the Authentic Leadership Questionnaire. Instead, the journal invited the authors of the original paper – minus Walumbwa – to submit a new paper that further validated the psychometric instrument. As Tourish writes with characteristic panache: ‘This is as though builders who continually confused centimetres with inches still managed to construct a house with pin-point precision – possible, but unlikely’ (p.162). It is win-win for the journal (more citations to inflate its impact factor) and for the authors (another publication in a premier outlet), even if it represents a net loss for research integrity.

The final chapters move away from questionable research practices and turn towards reclaiming meaningful research in management studies. It is here that Tourish seeks to outline a path forward in the business school, a way to lift ourselves out of the stinking bog of management research and into fresher pastures. In part, this would involve scholars engaging with more urgent issues around management and organizations, such as the impact of automation on employment or the influence of blockchain on finance (chapter 9). But perhaps even more compelling are the changes that Tourish urges us to adopt in our own way of thinking about scholarship – essentially a shift in attitude about the nature and purpose of management research (chapter 10). The first step would be to reconfigure our relationship to publishing in top-ranked journals. This could begin by ceasing to talk about the ‘publishing game’ altogether and refusing to measure the quality of our own scholarship against key performance indicators used by university managers. The next step would be to build a more humane workplace in which colleagues are valued for their intellectual contribution to a community of peers rather than for their REF score or h-index. ‘It might even be a good idea’, Tourish reminds us, ‘to write more books’ (p.245).

Of course, I do not agree with every suggestion that Tourish makes for revitalizing the business school. For example, Tourish urges management scholars to adopt ‘critical performativity’ as a guiding principle (p.248). Ironically, this concept – originally developed by Spicer *et al.* (2009) – suffers from some of the same flaws that Tourish sees elsewhere in management research: it is excessively abstract, frustratingly imprecise and vaguely utopian in its implications (Spoelstra and Svensson, 2016). Even if we accept that critical performativity is just a posh way of saying ‘academic-practitioner engagement’, there is no guarantee that the substance of this interaction will yield anything more meaningful than third-rate research. Tourish claims that ‘making some effort to influence the world beyond the seminar room is better than making none at all’ (p.249), but I’m not so sure. Isn’t the seminar room precisely the place where novel ideas are developed and students are educated? It would be a mistake, I think, to give up on the seminar room so easily.

The book could also have been a bit bolder in exploring voices beyond the usual suspects in management studies. Veteran scholars such as Karl Weick, Mats Alvesson and Yiannis Gabriel feature prominently, but less attention is paid to up-and-coming academics who are grappling with multiple management crises, such as institutional racism and workplace sexism (off the top of my head, Helena Liu, Banu Ozkazanc-Pan and Sheena Vachhani). This is a shame because the book could have showcased some of the cutting-edge work that is already going on, sometimes below the radar, in the business school today.

But these are minor quibbles. Ultimately, this book ought to be required reading for every management scholar, whether functionalist or interpretivist in orientation. Tourish offers a clear-sighted analysis of the predicament we find ourselves in as well as an escape-hatch for those who have become disenchanted with management research. To this extent, *Management Studies in Crisis* provides a much-needed counterbalance to such cynical self-help books as *How to Get Published in the Best Management Journals* (Clark *et al.*, 2017) and a manifesto for creating a business school that is untethered from the diktats of ‘research excellence’.

References

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