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Scientific Crisis of Business Administration PhD Candidates

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Abstract

This work depicts a specific moment of doubt, disbelief, and frustration of PhD students in relation to business´ PhD programs. The purpose of this communication and viewpoint is to stimulate discusses and reflections about a common yet under-examined feeling experienced by many PhD scholars: Frustration. Some factors that cause this problem are also punctuated in the text.

Keywords: Post Graduation; PhD; Crisis; Business Science

Reflection

Who reads our scientific papers and researches? What are we truly interested in? Why do we conduct research, for our own egos or something truly greater?

Business administration is an applied Social Science; therefore, it should encapsulate the real world and the application of scientific knowledge to solve problems faced in communities. To support this viewpoint, we will have to add someone´s (prominent) opinion in the field in order to have any credibility: "Management is an applied discipline; solving a relevant problem can have impact" (Hauser, 2017).

Tellis (2017) suggests that scholars should begin any research with the phenomenon. We ought to understand it deeply, and view it with fresh eyes, without the bias of prior theories and the interpretations of prior models and methods. What are the chances (time) a PhD has, when the first years are full of intense disciplines and theories? Still according to Tellis (2017), each person has a unique world view and his/her experiences and background should offer different interpretations and findings. But where this phenomenon exists? Since we are dealing with an applied Science, we would believe it is "out there": In the Society, in organizations, in social media... Through observations, one can have insights, which provide interpretations and inferences. After that, a theory can then be worked out. Theory, therefore, is only a "simple" and reduced explanation for a phenomenon, therefore without a phenomenon, there is nothing to be explained (Szostak, 2004, Tellis, 2017). The problem with "out there" in the ether or within the undefinable dark matter, is that it is subjective. If you are truly going to be objective, you need to begin with a blank slate. True you will begin with a hypothesis, but it is necessary to complete extensive research not to prove your hypothesis, but to have a solid overview of the literature which may in the end, invalidate your thesis. From that point on, is where we begin the writing. After we have done our own peer review, to see the Big Picture and not simply choose references that match our hypothesis. This would be meaningless, research for research sake signifying nothing.

Traditionally, the pursuit of truth has been attributed to science. More precisely, this objective is described as the formulation of questions that lead to an appropriate description or maybe a convincing explanation of aspects of the world. That sounds more acceptable if we talk about a natural Science, with its laws and more "precise" measurements. We do not want to extend ourselves too much about what is Knowledge, Meta Physics, Science and all these concepts we learn in epistemology and method classes, but it is clear to us (and probably to everybody else) that, specifically in social Science, for its nature and features, knowledge is even more provisional and susceptible to changes/improvements. So, how rational can it be?

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Nowadays, social phenomena possess "Short Shelf Life" for a certain amount of time, because of its contextual and temporal characteristics. There are many factors (conditions, perspectives, players, information among others) that make it impossible to grasp the meaning of an isolated or reintegrated social fact. In this sense, it gives us the impression that we are always "running after" something that is already changing or in another stage.

While the real empirical world, where the phenomena are, constantly change, we (academic researchers) are interested in "adding another brick to the big wall of knowledge" and make it look like a static thing. It is a widespread knowledge that is full of limitations (you can read this part in the end of any article) and that some would even preclude such propagation. And, in the most egregious situations, by the time Journals have evaluated the paper, the phenomena studied have probably already changed. How frustrating cannot that be?

Have you ever paid attention to every single citation reference used to buttress a fact or speculation? Authors select others that generally support their propositions, but sometimes the results are mentioned in an inappropriate way; by the use of phrases often out of context, which means, these limitations should raise some concerns that weren't taken into consideration when cited. Also, professors tend to ask students to mention seminal and "sacred cows" in dissertations, instead of building a more recent and meaningful literature (Babin et. al, 2016). Why are we so stick to famous theorists? For us, it looks like without citing them, the study is expendable. Of course, some classical references should be used when appropriate, but why must it be regurgitated to allow the reviewer to check off a little box in their criteria of what an adequate paper should contain?

There are a few academics really interested in comprehending something for any usefulness. Most of them aim to publish in international demanded Journals with Impact Factor (JCR) to secure their cite scores or prestige, so they keep teaching at PhD programs. The objective is to have someone else citing his/her study for, in many cases, his/her own prestige. In the logic of the "productivism" academy, there is no time for reflection and intellectual development, but only numbers of publications and databases. Researches also tend to show positive results, reiterating their own hypothesis, instead of presenting all points of view. Perhaps it would frustrate their rationality or view of the world. Failure to be intellectually honest and approach the subject with integrity, demand a more thorough analysis, because they are often the exception, or go against the "accepted criteria and conclusions", that may compromise financial investments, time, people, public policies etc. That is to say, you may well attack the foundations of "common knowledge" which the powers that be used to rule and maintain their control of the social order and its resources.

Sometimes scientific academia seems to be very familiar with the "Con Man of Tilburg". In 2013, New York Times dedicated many pages for the story and fraud of DiederikStapel. Stapel was an academic star in the Netherlands and abroad, the author of several well-regarded studies on human attitudes and behaviour. He was a pope of the modern psychology, who was in fact providing deceptive data. He usually published studies contrary to our intuition (counter intuitive), which earned him notoriety. By being "unedited" and proposing unexpected "discoveries", he easily passed the desk reviews (Levelt et. al, 2012). Pilati (2018) says that other problems are caused by the incessant quest for peer recognition. There may be some obscure means to make the results attractive. For example: Variables are partly reported by researches; Increase data collection from intermediate analyses; round the probability value to favour the result; "selectively" reporting the studies that worked well and as expected among other artifice.

So, what about methods? This is a topic that might bring heated discussions.

Some professors are pro deductivism, others pro inductivism. There is rarely something in between. And the problem: Students 'dissertation frequently have to have the same method appreciated by their research supervisors. Isn't it frustrating?

Deductivism:

Based on true premises, obtain necessarily true conclusions. Basically, the truth of the conclusions is based on the truth of the premises, but how to be sure of the truth of the premises? Example: If A happens (A implies B) then B happens. But: why does A happen? (Park, 2005). When you aim to contribute for business administration understanding, deductivism is very limited, because reality and variables are already there. No new facets can be shown in the Phenomenon.

Inductivism:

The elaboration of scientific theories in this method has as starting point the observation; then we try to find new cases that confirm these hypotheses. So, observation precedes theory and through inductive inferences we obtain generalizations.

Obviously, there are critics to this method, because researchers are always influenced in different ways: by the instruments used in the observation, researches knowledge, specific context etc etc. Karl Popper emerges as one of the greatest opponents of inductivism, criticizing verifiability and confirmability as criteria of scientific. On the other hand, with inductivism, there are some chances of seeing 'the new", instead of confirming something already said and done.

According to Neuenschwander(2013), Logical Positivists of the Vienna Circle (M. Schlick, O. Neurath, R. Carnap) and of the Berlin Group (H. Reichenbach, W. Dubislav, K. Grelling, A. Herzberg) fashioned an influential philosophical system. But they tended to disregard the fact that their notion of exactitude, especially in the social sciences and the humanities, went along with a notable narrowing and impoverishment of the objective. Of course, contemporary epistemologists, such as Popper and Lakatos did not agree.

Enough of critics, there is something deeper and ideological in method issues. Deductivism considers that you should not begin from empirical observation but of a fact-problem coming from a given theory. This would make more sense, if we were considering Natural Science, where rationalism plays a very important role. But deductivism in business administration? That can be, sometimes, a lot like producing a strict, predictable code of behaviour for a trained dog.

For us, considering subjectivity, Feyerabend's thoughts seem to be much more reasonable than the methods quoted above. Scientists act within their institution the same way - kept the proportions - that the clerics, monks, etc., in the institutions governed by the faith. That is, they preach a truth to the whole world (Feyerabend, 1999).

The subject is so conflicting that an Essay in Nature, "Where Science Has Gone Wrong (1987)," fretted over the public's growing antipathy toward science. The two authors (from the hard/natural science field) blamed the trend on philosophers who denied that science, in fact, discovers objective and absolute truths. The essay featured photographs of three "betrayers of the truth": Karl Popper, Thomas Kuhn and, of course, Paul Feyerabend. Curiously, these three authors can be considered the most influential ones in Social Science research.

In Kuhn's view, scientific research should not be conducted according to the dominant, often extremely conservative, paradigm. In this sense, Kuhn proposes that there is progress in a certain area of knowledge when scientific members are freed from critical analysis of methods, and can concentrate their efforts on a more subjective and abstract situation that make up or shape their field of study (Zylbersztajn, 1991). Popper inherits the positivist view that the social sciences are still systematic and have no unity (Regner, 1996). Feyerabend explicitly criticizes the static approach when he says that the idea of a static method or a static theory of rationality is based on an overly naive conception of man and his social contexts and circumstances (Feyerabend, 1993).

Another heated debate is about qualitative research, which is generally phenomenological, observational, subjective, descriptive, process-oriented, ungeneralizable, holistic, among others, whereas quantitative research can be characterised by such attributes as positivistic, measurable, objective, hypothetic-deductive, outcome-oriented, generalisable and particularistic.

Clearly today's biggest battles lie in an identity problem. From the outset, most universities have been shaped by political, economic, religious, and ideological interests; Science is a posterior priority. When your sole purpose is to produce pages of and hundreds of articles to "prove that you are conducting "valuable" research to satisfy funding and the established order, an independent observer would see through the fog and state the obvious, "this is all a waste of time".

The researcher in his/her social place produces a response to the society he/she confronts. The more displaced from this reality, the more alienated the research will be; the more abstracted (surfing in the transcendence of metaphysics) will be, without commitment to the true genesis of science, namely that it must fundamentally serve the dilemmas and questions of the human being, and not the opposite.

A problem presented to all scholars, in varying degrees, but particular for sociologists, since, they are supposed to produce the "truth" about the social world, is to restore the results of science in domains where results can positively contribute to solve problems that reach the public consciousness (Bourdieu, 2004). It is not that the researcher's concerns are not those of society´s, but the universe of public affairs is instantaneous; a liquid fluidity that quickly evaporates.

Well, we call attention for what we consider "The Dr. House (Tv Series) Principle": "Every patient lies". In order to counter the anti-scientific and unpredictable realm of human motivation, House provides rules for human behaviour (e.g. "everybody lies"). House makes a practical statement rather than a moral judgement (Strauman& Goodier, 2011). Naturally, the circumstances of his belief are different, for i.e. when a very unlikely diagnosis would only make sense if the patient is not telling the truth or when people are in extreme situations, we fear he might be correct when he says that everybody lies, especially when answering subjective questionnaires.

Respondents often respond what seems to be most correct, not necessarily what they think or are. Whether researchers say there are "ways" to check for coherence in the response, we cannot think that our respondents are so ignorant and naive that are not able to circumvent and manipulate such conditions and instruments. Either way, in subjective cases, multivariate statistical classification techniques have been used for decades to study and soften such problems. However, their inability to provide a realistic and flexible approach to support real-world decision-making problems in situations where classification is required, led management scientists as well as practitioners towards the exploitation of the recent advances in the fields of operations research and artificial intelligence (Zopounidis & Doumpos, 2002).

And mathematics in social science….let´s add something logical in a more subjective area. What is the most used field/area of mathematics applied in quantitative business administration researches? Statistics: the least precise of the natural sciences (Huff, 1993). For example, in the case of the 95% significance, of everyone hundred tests we make, the statistic predicts that five will be out of reach and may have any/another result. Therefore, in a world that produces thousands of scientific papers per week, where new Technologies are "discovered" every year and so on, it is only a matter of time before a study that contradicts the earlier ones emerges (Huff, 1993; Steele, 2005). We will not even get into any of the common bias problems in order not to over stretch this outburst/relief.

The point is, we know that there is a transfer of techniques and methods used in the natural sciences to social sciences, but it raises the question: "is it correct to apply such techniques and methods from other areas?" We know that abstraction is the classification of things.

Finally, many scientists have denied to social studies the character of science. They proclaim that such sciences should develop laws, where it establishes causal relationships between variables, which are able to be applied regularly. Culture, values, opinions and all these personal and subjective variables influence behaviour and perspectives. For this reason, Tsoukas (2017) states that "social" is considered more like a generic term that includes everything related to the man and to the society, that offers low precision of its main objects of study. Reality is too ambiguous, complex, broad, and diverse to be fully perceived, understood, or represented without some level of "simplification" (Tsoukas, 2017).

There are some days when we are more reluctant and confused about the real purpose and position of business studies in Science. On others, motivated to aggregate "something" to the big wall of knowledge and, perhaps, something that might help economic development. Whichever is true, this short paper will probably be another published one that will not reach nor Community, nor Organizations.
Perhaps you do not agree with what we´ve written here, but still: this is a sociological theme and, therefore, a limitation of this reflection.

Attn.
Some Alter Egos.

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