The social relevance and social impact of knowledge and knowing

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Abstract

In recent years, there has been a growing concern around the connection between theory and practice, rigour and relevance, theoretical consistency and impact. This Special Issue links with the literature on the co-production of knowledge and aims to extend the debate to the concept and practice of social value and social relevance, and their impact on different ways of knowing, researching and learning in organizations and in complex contexts and systems.

Keywords

Knowing, knowledge, social relevance

Introduction

A number of scholars (Knights and Scarbrough, 2010; Lundsten et al., 2013; Nicolai and Seidl, 2010; Parker, 2012; Straub and Ang, 2011) highlight a growing concern that management practice takes little notice of the knowledge produced in management research. This has given rise to urgent calls for management research to be made more 'relevant' (e.g. Huff and Huff, 2001; Mohrman et al., 2001; Rynes et al., 2007; Van de Ven, 2007). After the 1950s, US business schools began to emphasize the importance of academic rigour over applicability. However, the pendulum is now swinging back towards 'more practical relevance' (March, cited in Huff, 2000). Yet, the term 'relevance' is broad and can refer to very different things. The Oxford English Dictionary (Simpson and Weiner, 1989: 561) defines 'relevant' as 'bearing upon, connected with, pertinent to, the matter in hand'. In this sense, one can speak of X as being 'relevant' to Y, whenever X makes a difference to Y (see Bateson, 1972: 315). However, the question is this: what type of difference are we talking about? Although many researchers talk about 'relevance', they hardly ever specify what they actually mean by that term. As Augier and March (2007) say, 'The definition of relevance is ambiguous, its measurement imprecise, and its meaning complex' (p. 138).

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These issues are important to research, teaching and learning in organizations. In recent years, a wide range of publications have appeared under the label of 'social impact', 'relevance of knowledge' and 'impact'. Some discuss the relationship between management research and education, the degree to which management education imparts knowledge that enables managers to deal with 'wicked problems', and the extent to which academics help real organizations (e.g. Augier and March, 2007; Bennis and O'Toole, 2005; Bridgman, 2007; McMillan and Overall, 2016; Moustaghfir and Schiuma, 2013; Paton et al., 2014; Syed et al., 2010).

This question of relevance (Combs, 2013) has recently been considered as the outcome of a research process founded on the co-generation of knowledge, emerging in the tradition of action research (see Cassell and Johnson, 2006; Gustavsen, 2014; Reason and Bradbury, 2001), collaborative processes (Shani et al., 2008) and generative dialogue between practitioners and academics who share the research and the learning effort (Kempster and Stewart, 2010). While this proves to be extremely useful for framing academic attention to knowledge and the practical impact of research in organizational contexts, it could be widened. Against this background, the Special Issue maintains that it is essential to converse with diverse stakeholders in order to design a research and learning agenda anchored to the problems associated with multiple social contexts of co-living and able to generate social value through the knowledge produced (Delbridge, 2014). Through a specific reading of the dimensions of relevance and impact, our editorial emphasizes the need to

1. Reconfigure and give full legitimacy to applied social research on the themes of organization and management;
2. Consider the epistemological, methodological and operational implications of such an approach.

This perspective rests on diverse and crucial underlying assumptions. The first is that there are multiple forms of relevant knowledge production. Our position develops the distinction drawn by Alfred Schütz (1970) between *intrinsic relevance* and *imposed relevance.* The former pertains to research driven by wonder, surprise and curiosity concerning objects of research investment and interest (Carlsen and Sandelands, 2015). The latter is at risk of being instrumentally subservient to external demands. Paraphrasing Schütz, our purpose is to configure and legitimize research approaches in which *relevance imposed by contexts* (i.e. socially negotiated and constructed) becomes *intrinsic relevance* able to generate investments, passion and curiosity in the possibility of producing significant knowledge, pertinent to and in dialogue with theoretical and conceptual references. This is to recognize and legitimate the possibility of research and education oriented 'by' and 'to' knowledge issues and demands arising from social and organizational contexts, and people's work experience: research generated by problems that are not necessarily reducible to instrumental forms of inquiry (Alvesson, 2012). The Special Issue therefore supports a vision of knowledge production and consumption related to transformation (Engeström and Scaratti, 2016; Fournier and Smith, 2012; Ivaldi and Scaratti, 2016; Scaratti, 2014; Scaratti and Kaneklin, 2012). We argue that research will be more impactful, the more it is inductive, driven by a concern with real phenomena, linked to the complexity of experiences and close to the systems of activity in which the subjects participating in the research are involved.

The second assumption concerns the concept of evidence, which underpins the relevance and significance of certain types of knowledge: professional practice can/must use the best evidence available to formulate judgements and decisions in the field of action. An important reconfiguration of the evidence-based management (EBM) approach (Barends et al., 2014; Briner et al., 2009; Lower, 2007) makes explicit reference to four forms of evidence on which to draw for conscientious, explicit and judicious decision-making: research results; data, events and facts gathered by

organizations; the professional experience and judgement of practitioners; the values and the interests of stakeholders. The recognition of a plurality of sources of empirical evidence legitimates diverse forms of research that can fuel both a research-based practice and a practice-based research. That this is not a simple play on words, but a serious matter for debating the responsibility of identifying what is deemed valid or otherwise. At issue, is a reading of evidence as an outcome of both academic knowledge and of the context in which the research is carried out, that is, theory-driven, problem-driven and context-driven research.

The implications for management education and learning are critical. Relevance and impact call into account the distinction between *phronesis* and *episteme*. Episteme expresses knowledge comprising an analytical rationality able to generate universal principles; phronesis manifests and conveys guidance to act flexibly and adaptively in situations characterized by surprise, uncertainty and the changeability of contexts. It is grounded in the professional experience and judgement/wisdom that accumulates into the practical knowledge needed to cope with the challenges of the particular contexts (Shotter and Tsoukas, 2014). The Special Issue proposes attributing legitimacy to *phronesis* as a valuable source of knowledge and learning, endowed with its own plausibility, relevance and impact. From both a research and an educational perspective, it thus becomes possible to configure knowledge and learning embedded in a dialogue with practitioners, academics and contexts relating to the values, interests and concerns of the various stakeholders involved. Producing problem-generated knowledge and learning means assuming a responsibility for research outcomes, especially when they involve changes and decisions. In order to do so, it is necessary to maintain critical analysis of the knowledge produced and constant reflection on one's assumptions. We suggest that research and learning are authentically 'applied' if they are sensitive to the unfolding of events and situations, to shifts in scenarios, to changes that occur at various levels.

In short, the underlying hypothesis of this Special Issue is that knowledge production and consumption regarding the problems of individuals in their working and organizational lives means that attention to the context is the distinctive (though not the sole) aspect of relevance. Involvement of the stakeholders is essential and the manner in which knowledge is disseminated and used in specific practical contexts is important: it is the translation into practice that marks the difference.

These assumptions lead to particular consideration of the terms in the title of this Special Issue:

Relevance. We define 'relevance' as something that matters to the everyday work experience of practitioners: to their problems and issues, to the meanings and values they give to the problems they face and to knowledge which helps them analyse, understand and develop possible solutions. It involves a dialogue between academic and practical expertise. Relevance also consists of empirical data and situated learning which people construct jointly by negotiating and interpreting the meanings attributed to practice, rather than being a property of an aseptic description and a presumed faithful and objective representation of reality. This conception fits with both a problem orientation (Brewer, 2013) and the conceptual, operational and legitimative dimensions described by Jarzabkowski et al. (2010) in their analysis of the construction of relevance.

Impact. Concerns the transformative aspects generated by knowledge production processes, both in regard to the possibility of change and expansive learning. Knowledge has impact when it highlights contradictions and dilemmas which challenge what is taken for granted in particular contexts, and when it fuels reflexive processes able to support actions undertaken to change the system of activities. This requires embedding these processes in educational practice. The transformative outcome, however, is not automatic. It involves processes of translation and transformation of knowledge (Carlile, 2004), whose structure is defined through the negotiation/opposition of interests, rhetorical conventions and power dynamics.

Social. Lima and Wood (2014) argue that the idea behind the concept of social impact is the ownership and use of knowledge by society. However, despite the recognition of its importance, a more precise definition of the term 'social impact' does not exist in the literature (European Commission, 2010; Guisado et al., 2010). Nevertheless, there is a consensus on adoption of the following definitions:

1. *Outputs* – the routine products of scientific activity, including publications, reports, research datasets and courses, patents, equipment and software;
2. *Outcomes* – the results of research activity, which may be conceptual (e.g. a new theory), practical (e.g. a new analytical technique) or physical (e.g. a new device or product);
3. *Impact* – these are the contributions of and benefits to the scientific community and to society.

Considering these, the social impact of research can be defined as 'an influence or benefit (realized or expected) from the results of research activity to the research community or to society at large'.

The specific definition of 'social' depends on the unit and focus of analysis. As such, it may involve:

- The emergent, ongoing process of knowledge production and learning as people in a group, organization, community give sense to their daily working life;
- The values, rules and collective identity that nurture the reciprocal influence between organizations and their environment: the symbolic system diffused and implicit in a specific context;
- The constant production and reproduction of situated systems of activity, triggering discussion, interactions and conflict dynamics by which people shape what they consider to be intelligible, suitable and actionable in their context;
- The engagement and involvement of different stakeholders in research, who contribute through various levels of participation and who have a stake in the knowledge generated;
- The social capital and social impact generated by the organizational system while pursuing productive goals. The term 'societal value' or 'shared value' (Porter and Kramer, 2011) is an issue with which many companies are now concerning themselves, pushing for new conceptualizations and research directions.

These different meanings of 'social' express the idea that socially relevant and impactful knowledge and education means paying attention to plural dimensions and to meanings and practical implications in the context.

Accordingly, the Special Issue aims both to assign responsibility and to impose a challenge: *Responsibility* resides in activating pathways of change within organizations; the *challenge* is engaging in research and education that supports and develops renewed economic, organizational, social and institutional patterns, but in more critical and responsible ways. From this twofold perspective, we emphasize three implications: epistemological, methodological and practical:

Epistemological – going beyond a univocal science oriented to seeking regularities, defining universal laws to an approach that extends beyond disciplinary boundaries (Delbridge, 2014) and acknowledges multiple forms of knowledge and learning that includes tacit, embedded and pragmatic orientations (Anderson et al., 2001) – one that connects both to real problems and the

processes of social construction with different meanings in different contexts. To quote Barley[1]

we need to look wide. People live in the real world, and the real world is populated not only by people, but by objects, computers, animals, and a lot of materiality – space, in particular. Any technology or material objects contain constraints and affordance that shape behaviour and are worthwhile investigating.

Methodological – The active involvement of various actors concerned (researchers, people at all levels of organizations) and their participation in the entire research process, thus adapting research methods and tools that take into account the various voices and active participation of people in all phases of the knowledge production process. The more that practitioners are involved at different levels of the process of knowledge production, the higher will be the impactful effect of knowledge generated in order to influence the practices in use.

Practical – refers to the conditions necessary to generate and disseminate relevant and impactful knowledge in this way. This requires an explicit agreement among all actors involved, institutional alliances that legitimate the investment of energy and cost in the research, and an educational endeavour to enhance the connection between wisdom, management and organization, providing conditions in which managers and professionals might 'think greatly' about their function (Nonaka et al., 2014).

Articles in the special issue

The contributions to this Special Issue focus on specific aspects and also share some common features. Thomaz Wood's paper addresses the Special Issue themes by exploring the meaning, in a particular geo-political context, of social relevance and impact and critically reflecting on the connection between research and the generation of social value. He adopts a critical perspective oriented to the ethics of care, developing a reflection centred on dual system research: applied research centres and scientific research centres. By involving the participants through interviews, interactions and workshops, the author explores the coexistence among different modes of knowledge production, highlighting tensions and viable strategies in an attempt to combine rigour and relevance. Of particular interest is the analysis of the activities carried out by the research centres. On one hand, the study evidences the importance of the activity system as a source of relevant data, and on the other, connects the generation of social value to processes that mobilize relations, interests, participation and the desire to circulate and disseminate knowledge. In particular, reflection on four key activities (identifying topics, generating knowledge, disseminating knowledge and mobilizing interest groups) yields insights into the concrete configuration of the research agenda; access to the field as the prime ambit for the production of relevant knowledge; and the various ways to circulate and communicate knowledge. The distinction between social relevance and social impact enables Wood to highlight competences (communication, relationship, civil advocacy, influencing decision processes) which integrate with and enrich the traditional profile of the academic, but also to emphasize how the generation of social impact does not consist in the production of new knowledge, but rather in the translation to different contexts of knowledge already existing and available. At stake is the re-appropriation of an authentic moral dimension of research, seriously oriented to local problems and distant from the confusion that equates social impact with the number of publications in top journals.

The article of Marika Shaupp and Jaakko Virkkunen develops the relationship between theory and practice by identifying in the difference between empirical and theoretical abstraction, the possibility of connecting the two dimensions together. The authors advocate emancipatory research

oriented to growth and the generation of value in managerial practices and organizational processes. This perspective is firmly anchored to the forms of representation (abstraction) that connect different aspects of the reality with which one is confronted: empirical abstraction (regarding the detection and subsequent classification of similarities and differences between objects) and theoretical abstraction (centred on systematic relations among objects and processes of their emergence and change over time). The process of theoretical abstraction starts from the presence of contradictions that prompt questions and reflections on beliefs and practices in use. The article offers an example of how the core competence of a corporation, translated into a generic list of competences that become fixed characteristics isolated from temporal and contextual dimensions. Without reflection on their relationship with the context and the specific activity system in which they are solicited, the identification of core competencies is likely to become an exercise of mere compilation.

The themes of expansive learning and transformation stand in the background of the third article by Analisa Sannino and Yrjö Engeström, which analyses the method of the change laboratory (CL) as an emblematic example of intervention research. This approach adopts formative interventions centred on the possible transformation of object-oriented activities and utilizes activity theory, which describes activity systems as relatively durable formations consisting of actors working on a shared object, mediated by instruments, division of labour and rules. The sense of 'societally' connects with the involvement of various stakeholders in the collaborative activation of new possibilities, generating unexpected learning of 'what is not yet there' and expressed in the process of discussion, negotiation and working through existing contradictions. Sannino and Engeström highlight the concept of '*impactful*' knowledge as *actionable* (to be turned into transformative action) and *possibility knowledge* (about possible new forms and patterns of objects in lifeworlds and social environments). The article explores the methodological implications of using epistemological principles in different contexts, identifying challenges and issues for the deployment and further development of the CL method. Emphasized, in particular, is the validity of the approach in activating critical work encounters. The analysis of the cases offers evidence of how a robust theory can enhance and shape an intervention methodology in order to develop the building of dynamic possibility knowledge.

These three articles illustrate how addressing complex social problems requires a plurality of approaches and methods and benefits by working closely with stakeholders and practitioners. The relevance of knowledge is a situated, contextual and dialogical process, unfolding through relational dynamics among the various actors involved rather than an invariant and invariable feature independent of the organizational context within which it is produced.

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Note

1. The Stephen Barley quote is taken from an interview conducted with him by one of the SI editors in July 2015 at Stanford University – School of Engineering, Management Science and Engineering.

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