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## Contents

The Birth of Management Theory .....	1049
Theoretical Foundations .....	1052
Mainstream Management Research .....	1054
Postmodern Management Research .....	1057
The Collapse of Theory .....	1058
Conclusion: Management Scholarship for the Twenty-First Century .....	1063
Cross-References .....	1066
References .....	1066

## Abstract

The quest for management theory started in earnest at the dawn of the twentieth century. Its goal is to make management a reliable undertaking, leading to predictable results. Disagreement exists about the research framework best suited to this pursuit. However, except for postmodern authors, management researchers assume the existence of stable and causally effective structures underpinning organizational life. Such an existence implies a deterministic picture of human agency. Equivocations, ambiguities, tautologies, and imprecise language obfuscate this implication, hollowing out management theory of its performative quality. A century after its inception, the quest for management theory has failed. Other avenues for management scholarship exist.

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As Professor Gould notes in the introduction of the present volume, Fordism underpinned public policy making during much of the twentieth century – and in many ways still does. Starting as an industrial management theory, under the name of scientific management, Fordism evolved into a political regime associated with economic growth and welfare state. Although the social consequences of Fordism in general and scientific management in particular have been widely discussed (including in the preceding chapters and volumes of this *Handbook*), the implications of the idea of management theory have received less scholarly attention. This is unfortunate, because, as this chapter shows, such an exploration sheds new lights on management research. This endeavor starts with an examination of the concept of theory.

In everyday language, a theory is a speculation or hypothesis, a loosely substantiated conjecture about a general or particular aspect of human experience. In scientific and scholarly literature, the term acquires a more precise meaning and stands for a group of statements about the world and their logical consequences (Bogen 2017). Scientific theories range from descriptions of regularities observed in natural or experimental conditions, to laws, like Newton's, that are universally applicable within a field of study. In all cases, the validity of theories goes beyond the phenomena that underwrote their (inductive) formulation, all other things remaining the same. That is, scientific theories express permanence: they describe and codify patterns deemed stable enough to serve as bases for predictions about as yet unobserved phenomena, thus allowing, in principle at least, for control of these phenomena. Lyotard (1984) called “performativity” this predictive, instrumental quality of scientific theoretical knowledge, from which science draws its legitimacy.

Management researchers have embraced the performativity of scientific theories. In management studies, a theory is a testable proposition, or group of propositions, through which scholars describe organizational phenomena with the view of predicting the occurrence and course of similar ones (Shapira 2011: 1313; Sutton and Staw 1995: 378; Gioia and Pitre 1990: 587). If they want to contribute to management theory, researchers must therefore study managers' environment and behavior as well as their consequences, in the hope of identifying regular relationships between them. Once identified, such relationships are codified as management theories, that is, are formalized as expectations that identical consequences will follow should the same behavior be repeated, everything else (environmental conditions especially) remaining equal.

As Locke (1989) notes, donning the mantle of science enabled management to acquire the status of an academic discipline. At university, if students cannot practice management, they can study theory. Theoretical knowledge offsets the lack of experience of future managers by allowing them to predict organizational phenomena, including the consequences of their own behavior. Theory also helps

current managers improve their practice (Christensen and Raynor 2003). Expressed differently, theory allows managers to manage like engineers engineer and doctors heal patients: safely, reliably, and on the back of a formal body of theoretical knowledge acquired at university. Such has been in any case management academia's overall promise since its inception (Khurana 2007). This has been a convincing pledge: while business and management programs have established themselves as the most popular ones among US undergraduates (about 20% of current enrolments), faculty in business, management, and related disciplines command the highest salaries, after those of legal studies academics (Snyder et al. 2018; CUPA-HR 2016).

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## The Birth of Management Theory

If the origins of management thought are multiple and date back to ancient philosophy (Joullié and Spillane 2015), management theory has a much more recent history. Commentators (e.g., Kiechel 2012; Wren and Bedeian 2009) have located its formal birth in the address that Henry Towne, co-founder of the Yale Lock Manufacturing Company, delivered in May 1886 to the American Society of Mechanical Engineers. In his talk, Towne lamented that, whereas engineering was in his day already endowed with a formal body of knowledge, the "management of works," a modern art essential to social welfare, was still a scholarly orphan. In Towne's view, the missing discipline would be rooted in economics (but developed by engineers), since management's ultimate objective is economic gain.

Despite calling for its development, Towne came short of uttering the expression "management theory." He was also seemingly unaware that, over a century before his talk, an economist had laid the first foundation of the notion. In *The Wealth of Nations*, published in 1776, Smith (2007: 603) indeed held that division of labor contributes to economic growth through increased efficiency, if also making workers' "stupid and ignorant" and widening the distance between them and their employer. Empirical confirmation of Smith's insight became available when, in the first decade of the twentieth century, Frederick Taylor argued and Henry Ford showed that manufacturing process simplification and standardization made spectacular productivity gains possible, enabling in turn lower consumer prices and increased wages. Unlike Towne, Taylor (1919: 27) did use the term "theory" to refer to his "principles of scientific management." Although industrialist and social reformer Robert Owen (1771–1858) preceded Taylor when he advanced principles to regulate cooperative work, the latter can justifiably claim the title of first self-conscious management theorist (Besides Owen and Taylor, one must mention Charles Babbage, Henry Gantt, Henri Fayol, as well as Frank and Lillian Gilbreth (among a few others) as pioneers of management theory (Wren 2004; Wren and Greenwood 1998)).

Following Smith, Taylor insisted on the distinction between mental and physical work, that is, between managing (task specification and planning) and executing. With the control of the work, prestige and power went to the production managers.

As Smith feared, however, workers resented such a loss of status and tended to go on strike where industrialists implemented Taylor's ideas. To no avail: once scientific management had proved its mettle in a variety of settings, the idea that management can be systematized and that there are techniques available to managers the implementation of which makes their organization more profitable and society more prosperous (if perhaps less harmonious) proved irresistible. Management theory was no longer a project, but, in some ways at least, a tangible reality.

Early twentieth-century management theorists contemplated a vast research program. In an effort to improve workshop productivity and in the spirit of Taylor's time and motion studies, the US National Academy of Sciences launched in 1924 a series of experiments at Western Electric's Hawthorne Plant in Cicero, Illinois. The results of the Hawthorne studies were puzzling at first: although productivity within a small group of women assembling relay parts improved, no change in environmental conditions, in work schedules, or even in incentives could explain why. This succession of rejected hypotheses led to the studies' abandonment, until Harvard Business School's Elton Mayo revived them. Mayo (2007 [1933]) held that he could explain the otherwise unexplainable by factoring in the relationships that developed between workers, between workers and their supervisor, and between the entire group under analysis and the researchers. Work organizations, extended to those in contact with them, were "social systems" transforming inputs into outputs (Roethlisberger and Dickson 1934).

In 1915, as scientific management consolidated its influence over North American manufacturing, English engineer Frederick Lanchester applied mathematics to warfare (Lanchester 1956). In particular, Lanchester devised a series of mathematical equations to predict the outcome of the confrontation of land forces. During WWII, British and American army engineers extended Lanchester's ideas first to aerial and naval battles and then to the control of resources and logistic processes. After the conflict, their models, enriched with statistical tools and numerical algorithms, proved their usefulness in the private sector. Called today "operations research" or "management science" when specifically applied to business situations, these mathematical techniques and concepts enable the optimization of any situation adequately represented by an objective function, be it crop yield, assembly line performance, or vehicle routing (Beer 1968).

Beyond the control of resources and logistics processes, the quest for a general management theory continued. For instance, Chester Barnard (1968 [1938]) held that work organizations are cooperative systems. If, unlike the Catholic Church, they rarely survive for long, Barnard argued, it is mainly because they do not meet two essential criteria. These, for Barnard, were effectiveness and efficiency, which he defined as attainment of collective purposes and fulfilment of personal motives, respectively. Accepting much of Barnard's analysis, Simon (1997 [1947]) set out to lay down the foundations of an "administrative science." In the management of administrations, Simon argued, efficiency must receive the highest priority, and decision-making is the most important process. This endeavor, which rests on logical and mathematical considerations, requires distinguishing value judgments from factual observations. However, since, as Barnard taught, efficiency involves personal

motives, decision-making is never entirely rational. It is bounded by the values of the decision-maker. Not that this individual is beyond scientific study and understanding: intelligence is merely computation, and human beings are simple “behaving systems,” complex only insofar as they respond to an environment that is itself complex (Simon 1996 [1969]).

Simon joined what would become the Carnegie School of Industrial Administration (GSIA) in 1949. Working notably with James March and Richard Cyert, he established the bases of the Carnegie School, an intellectual movement known for its emphasis on decision-making based on quantitative methods. Quite naturally, when in 1959 the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching delivered its report railing against the poor academic standards of management programs (the Ford Foundation report of the same year delivered a similar verdict), it considered GSIA’s methods and agenda as models to imitate (Khurana and Spender 2012). Thanks to the endorsement of the American Association of Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) and to generous grants made available to those institutions that implemented its prescriptions, the 1959 Carnegie Foundation report’s recommendations were widely implemented, reshaping management academia first in North America then all over the world.

Igor Ansoff, an engineer who worked for NATO before joining Simon at GSIA, applied quantitative methods to long-term corporate planning. As part of this effort, Ansoff coined the expression “corporate strategy,” then an unknown and empty phrase to which an eponymous book (Ansoff 1965) gave substance and popularity. Ansoff was an academic pioneer, but he was neither the first nor the only one to promote strategy as a management concern. In 1963, Bruce Henderson had started what would a few years later be the Boston Consulting Group, a management consultancy hailing “business strategy” as its specialty (BCG 2013). Based on historical data, Henderson found in particular that the evolution of manufacturing costs follows in most industries a predictable pattern, which corporate portfolio managers can use to decide on investments and divestments. Bringing the mathematical rigor of his PhD in economics, Michael Porter (1980, 1985) provided additional theoretical support to his predecessors’ work. He notably argued that organizations determine their strategy after in-depth analysis of the “competitive forces” that operate in their industries and markets. Chief executives respond to these forces by following one of three possible generic strategies, which Porter analyzed as chains of value-adding activities and resources. Among these are competitive advantages, the attributes that enable an organization to outperform its competitors.

Lanchester evaluated organizational resources, Mayo observed people working in groups, Simon analyzed decision-making, Ansoff investigated corporate investments, and Henderson delved into manufacturing costs, while Porter probed into corporations’ economic environments, processes, and resources. All the same: despite their differences, these endeavors, for successful and influential as they have been on their own, belong to the same tradition. Called by Kiechel (2010: 4) “Greater Taylorism,” this tradition is more accurately qualified as structural-functionalist-positivist, for reasons to be exposed shortly. It is a tradition that assumes that management research

is a scientific endeavor, because it aims at an objective similar to that of the natural sciences: the production of a performative body of knowledge, that is, theory allowing for prediction and control of particular types of phenomena.

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## Theoretical Foundations

The quest for management theory has not ended since the days of the pioneers mentioned in the foregoing. More appropriate today is to speak of management theories, for contemporary management studies is a field marked by increasing theoretical multiplicity. Taylor sought to improve the efficiency of physical tasks and based his theory on the view that line workers only execute, not organize, their work. Conversely, Mayo could formulate a theory about the data collected at Hawthorne only after taking account of employees' interpretations of the experiment. Different levels of analysis produce different management theories. On this basis, there seems to be no end to their multiplication (Whitley 1984). Already in 1961, Koontz (1961) lamented a theoretical "jungle" of thickening complexity, identifying first 6, then 11, distinct families of theories less than two decades later (Koontz 1980). The jungle has not receded since: an overarching criterion for article acceptance in a leading management journal today is that the research it reports extends existing theory or builds new theory.

About the phenomena they study, what these phenomena encompass and how to study them, management researchers explicitly or implicitly develop clusters of assumptions. For instance, scholars wanting to develop a theory describing how people behave in organizations must first define what they believe qualifies (or not) as an organization, what kind of behavior is relevant, and what kind is not. As the examples of Taylor and Mayo illustrate, however, such definitions rest themselves on different conceptions about human nature and social reality. Underlying the plethora of management theories lies therefore another profusion, that of ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions. Different clusters of assumptions lead to different conclusions about how to conduct management research, about what kind of phenomena should attract researchers' attention and therefore about what counts as a management theory.

In management and organizational studies, an influential study of the assumptions scholars espouse when conducting their research is Burrell and Morgan's (1979). At the time of writing, the work has attracted over 15,597 citations according to Google Scholar; already in 1996, the work's influence was judged "hegemonic" (Deetz 1996: 191) (In 2013, the work attracted over 6000 citations (Hassard and Cox 2013: 1701); this shows that, rather than waning, the influence of Burrell and Morgan's study is growing.). That Burrell and Morgan's study has been influential does not mean it has been consensual, however. For example, disagreements exist about the number of research frameworks, their names, or the research practices they produce. Thus, in place of the four frameworks identified by Burrell and Morgan, authors have proposed three (Locke 2001: 7–12) or two (Lakomski and Evers 2011; Boisot and McKelvey 2010; Clegg and Ross-Smith 2003). In the related field of

sociology of work, Watson (2003) has distinguished three sets of methodological assumptions leading to six different research approaches (In a later work, Watson (2017) argues for four different approaches.). What remains certain is that Burrell and Morgan's work has shaped discussions about such matters; its terminology has been retained in the discussion about to unfold.

Burrell and Morgan (1979: 21–25) called “paradigms” the four clusters of assumptions that frame management and organizational research and named them “functionalist,” “interpretivist,” “radical structuralist,” and “radical humanist.” In their view, these paradigms are incommensurable, in the sense that they rest on fundamentally incompatible views about social science and social reality, leading to radically different research practices, objectives, and results. For instance, researchers working as per the radical structuralist and functionalist paradigms share an emphasis on objective study of social reality, while those following the radical humanist and the interpretive paradigms believe that social phenomena can only be understood subjectively. That is, it is the perspective and intentions of those individuals the behavior of whom is studied that primarily concern the latter group of scholars, not the actual manifestations or consequences of that behavior (which concern the former group of researchers). However, still according to Burrell and Morgan, adepts of the interpretivist and functionalist paradigms promote social regulation, while those scholars following the radical humanist and the radical structuralist paradigms stimulate research enabling social change.

Burrell and Morgan's (1979: 32–33) radical humanist scholars deserve further exposition, for their conception of research sets them apart on management academia's scene. These researchers believe that ideological constructs dominate human consciousness and estrange human beings from their full potentialities. In particular, they see a science of management as a construct leading to alienation, with the Taylorization of the workplace held as a prime example of such dehumanization. In the radical humanist perspective, the trust invested in management as an applied science is one of these ideological barriers to human fulfilment. Radical humanist scholars thus see their mission as identifying the multifarious manifestations of the management science ideology and help fellow human beings in their attempts to liberate themselves from it.

A critical evaluation of Burrell and Morgan's classification is not immediately relevant to the present argument (Hassard and Cox 2013 and Deetz 1996 are examples of such evaluations). Similarly, whether the paradigms Burrell and Morgan identified are truly incommensurable, thus leading to irreconcilable research practices and incompatible management theories, or can be somehow reconciled within one or more meta-paradigms is a question that can be postponed, at least for now (Clegg and Ross-Smith (2003) answer it by the negative, while Lakomski and Evers (2011) claim that “naturalistic coherentism” can account for the main paradigms that actually exist. Boisot and McKelvey (2010) argue that complexity science provides a bridge between research paradigms, while Wicks and Freeman (1998) believe that pragmatism provides a research ground common to all paradigms.). General comments about management research are in order before a discussion on such matters is possible.

## Mainstream Management Research

Beyond their disagreements, authors who have analyzed the assumptions underpinning management research grant a dominant role and influence to the sort of research that Burrell and Morgan called “functionalist,” if under a different name. For instance, while Watson (2017), Clegg and Ross-Smith (2003), and Johnson and Duberley (2000) have called such research “positivist,” Boisot and McKelvey (2010) and Locke (2001) have preferred to name it “modernist” and Lakomski and Evers (2011) “empiricist.” Although connected, these terms deserve to be distinguished.

“Modernism” refers to a period in the history of Western ideas, arts, and culture, with roots in the nineteenth century but culminating in the first decades of the twentieth century. “Empiricism” is the view, developed from the sixteenth century onward, that the exclusive source of knowledge is experience, that is, information conveyed by the senses. Positivism is a philosophy of science first given systematic exposition by Auguste Comte (1798–1957) and further developed in the 1920s and 1930s (Kolakowski 1969). Positivist science accepts the empiricist premise: it studies reality in its phenomenal manifestations. It ignores moral values to focus exclusively on facts, defined as corroborated, intersubjective sense data. Accordingly, positivist scientists strive for objective (value-free) observations of phenomena, from which they inductively infer theories that they confront to new observations by way of predictions and experiments. In the life and physical sciences, positivism is the arch-dominating, not to say quasi exclusive, philosophy.

Functionalism is not a philosophy of science but a conception of social reality. Although often said obsolete, functionalism is still central to sociology (Kingsbury and Scanzoni 2009). Functionalists believe that they can adequately describe any social phenomenon (institution, pattern of behavior, norm, or belief) in the terms of the function (and of the effects of this function) this phenomenon discharges on other phenomena under analysis, irrespective of the intentions of the individuals that animate or harbor it (Gellner 1970). As Radcliffe-Brown (1940) long argued, however, functionalism is intimately associated with another sociological ontology, namely, structuralism (on this theme, see also Lévi-Strauss 1963). Structuralism is the view that phenomena only exist through their relationships with larger, ordering structures (Blackburn 2005: 353). The connection between functionalism and structuralism is a natural one, for the concept of relationship almost invariably leads to that of function. Further, to speak of function is to imply that there is an entity that functions. If phenomena are only observable through relationships seen as functional manifestations and if functions manifest the existence of entities that can be decomposed into sub-entities, the difference between functions and structures is merely lexical. In this sense, dissociating functionalism from structuralism and holding them to be incommensurable views of social reality, as Burrell and Morgan did, are unwarranted moves; many authors understandably speak of structural-functionalism (e.g., Dew 2014).

In social science, the structural-functionalist tradition is perhaps best exemplified in the work of Émile Durkheim (2002 [1897]). For Durkheim, society is the ultimate



structure, a determined, complete, coherent, and self-regulating system made of causally interconnected components (structures). Among these are work organizations, which stand for and discharge social functions. Individuals do not exist as autonomous beings but only as components (substructures) of society and its institutions, i.e., as vehicles of the various social functions they simultaneously embody and discharge.

In management studies, the combination of structuralism, functionalism, and positivism has been attractive to scholars. Indeed, the research framework such a combination produces provides immediate ontological, epistemological, and methodological support to the quest for management theory. As per the structural-functionalist view, work organizations, their internal components and attributes (equipment, patents, brands, employees, hierarchies, processes, etc.), and their partners, suppliers, customers, inputs, and outputs are nothing but structures which discharge and embody regular and causally effective functions (relationships) on other structures. Further, as per the positivist research framework, the behavior (function) of these structures is amenable to objective observation, thus ensuring the scientific status and value neutrality of the resulting management theory.

In the structural-functionalist-positivist (SFP) perspective, management research is an endeavor modeled on that of natural science, resting on similar assumptions and aiming at the same overall objective of performativity: prediction and control by way of theories. Management is itself a practice conducted as per a body of theoretical knowledge, expressed in scientific language and grounded on objective observation and quantitative data analysis. As in other applied sciences, there are universal, value-free, and predictive methods available to managers through which they can improve their practice. The SFP conception of management studies is that which Taylor pioneered and to which Simon and his peers at GSIA first gave unassailable academic credentials. It has formed the backbone of management academia to this day (hence the qualifiers “traditional,” “orthodox,” or again “mainstream” that are also used to denote it). As attested by AACSB’s mission statement, it is a conception of management research and practice that, in typical positivist fashion, equates scholarly and scientific progress with social progress and general human welfare (“The vision of AACSB is to transform business education for global prosperity. Business and business schools are a force for good, contributing to the world’s economy, and AACSB plays a significant role in making that benefit better known to all stakeholders – serving business schools, students, business, and society” (AACSB n.d.).).

Besides Simon, one can cite Blau (1963), Pfeffer (1982), or Donaldson (1996) as salient representatives of the SFP tradition in management and organization studies. The appearance of game theory, the rise of economics and finance in management schools’ curricula, and the preponderance of quantitative studies in management journals are signs that the SFP tradition is not only current but also gaining influence because quantitative analysis is associated with certainty, objectivity, and instrumentality, all notions at the heart of the positivist research program. “Evidence-based management” (Pfeffer and Sutton 2006; Rousseau and McCarthy 2007), insofar as it is conceived as a research agenda and not merely a body of practice, is another outgrowth of the positivist branch of management studies.

Burrell and Morgan's radical structuralist account of management research, as its name indicates, hinges on the view that stable structures underpin social reality. Citing Marx as example, Burrell and Morgan (1979: 34) note that, for radical structuralists, "radical change is built in the very nature and structure of contemporary society" and that such structure "provide[s] explanations of the basic interrelationships within the context of total social formations." Interpretivist social researchers espouse this (structural-functionalist) conception of social reality insofar as they are committed to the position, as Burrell and Morgan (1979: 31) put it, that "the world of human affairs is cohesive, ordered and integrated." When Mayo and Roethlisberger spoke of causally effective "social systems" to account for what happened at Hawthorne, they did not mean differently.

In *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, Max Weber (1969 [1915]) argued that social scientists should inquire in the causes of unintended events, but ignore intended ones. If an event occurs as the deliberate result of an individual's action, this particular individual is the cause of that event, and there is no need to engage in scientific inquiry to discover what caused it. However, if the event is unintended, then its real causes are unknown, and it is therefore worthwhile to mobilize scientific means to discover them. Such a discovery will make it possible to judge whether the event in question will occur again or to control its occurrence. In this argument at least, Weber did not deviate from positivist science's overall performative agenda, according to which the ultimate purpose of scientific knowledge is to expand and consolidate control of reality. The interpretive school of social research is thus not an alternative but a complement to the picture provided by the positivist account (Khurana 2007: 394).

The radical humanist management researcher, according to Burrell and Morgan (1979: 32), has much in common with his interpretivist counterpart. Both believe in the existence of stable, superordinate arrangements of organizational reality buried in human consciousness (for instance, in the shape of ideologies or moral constraints), which they strive to discover and codify. Where radical humanists differ from interpretivists is in how to use such knowledge: to regulate organizations for interpretive scholars or to change it for radical humanist researchers. In either case, however, scholars retain the central performative agenda of SFP research.

In summary, although differing in their methods and in some of their assumptions about social reality, the four paradigms of management research identified by Burrell and Morgan (1979) share a central agenda. They are variations on the quest for stable and ordering features underpinning organizational reality, the existence of which is assumed. In making this assumption, management researchers walk in the steps of their illustrious predecessors in social science, be it Marx, Durkheim, or Weber, all of whom took the existence of causal trends or relationships structuring the social phenomena they studied for granted (Giddens 2000: 239). The alleged incommensurability of Burrell and Morgan's research paradigms must therefore be requalified: in a crucial aspect, it is merely superficial. They differ not on the nature of the ultimate substratum of organizational reality (stable, causally effective structures) but on where to locate that substratum and how to study it.

Once suitably identified and codified by management researchers, stable and causally effective structures form bases from which prediction and control of organizational phenomena are possible. For instance, if organizational cultures manifest themselves along fixed dimensions (stable and causally effective structures), then managers must take advantage of these dimensions when restructuring or regulating organizations (management theory; see Buono and Bowditch 2003). The idea that there is such a thing as a management theory to be discovered because there are such things as stable, causally effective features that determine organizational reality is therefore *the* theory underpinning all management theories. However, in this statement, “theory” is not to be understood in the scientific sense (i.e., as lawlike generalization stemming from past observations intended to predict future ones), but, in the everyday sense, as mere speculation. Management researchers accept it a priori, as an axiom, because without it, the performativity of their research cannot be justified.

In its current format, management academia as a whole hinges of the possibility of theory. It is thus unsurprising that, despite their alleged incommensurability, the various approaches to management research that Burrell and Morgan identified have gained momentum within management research. Not that their respective influences are equivalent; for instance, compared to the dominating influence of the functionalist account, that of the radical humanist paradigm appears modest (Gioia and Pitre 1990). Whatever the case, if management academics suffer from “physics envy” (Bygrave 1989: 16), they also labor under a managerial bias, since the ultimate objective of their research is to provide means for organizational regulation or transformation, that is, executive control. Irrespective of their research paradigm, they are all, in Baritz’s (1960) apt expression, “servants of power.”

## Postmodern Management Research

Published in 1979, Burrell and Morgan’s work could not include a discussion of a stream of management studies that is embryonic in their analysis but only took shape in earnest in the early 1990s. It is a stream of management studies that appears in later discussions of research paradigms, albeit with a much weaker degree of agreement about what sort of research it consists of and to what sort of theories (if any at all) it leads. This is the research framework called “postmodern” (Hassard 1994), “postpositivist” (Clegg and Ross-Smith 2003), “postmodernist” (Lakowski and Evers 2011; Boisot and McKelvey 2010; Johnson and Duberley 2000), or again “deconstructionist” (Hassard and Cox 2013). Another umbrella term for this body of management research is “critical management studies” (Alvesson and Willmott 1992; Fournier and Grey 2000; Boje et al. 1996; Adler et al. 2007), although other commentators have preferred to speak of the “symbolic perspective” (Sulkowski 2010) or “subversive functionalism” (Koss Hartmann 2014). Supported by dedicated journals, postmodern management research, in its multifarious hues, represents today an active area of scholarship. However, even if many postmodern research themes have found their way in mainstream management research

(Hassard and Cox 2013), postmodern management scholarship has had little influence on the content of current management curricula. There are good reasons for this.

Along the lines followed by Burrell and Morgan's radical humanist scholars, postmodern management researchers seek to distance themselves from the tradition of Taylor and Simon because they are wary of its consequences. They, too, pursue a "political" research agenda insofar as they oppose what they believe are the noxious effects of a science of management. What makes postmodern management researchers' position distinctive, however, is their rejection of stable empirical referents. Following such thinkers as Foucault, Feyerabend, and Derrida, postmodern management authors either reject the notion of "truth," which they see as an element of a discourse seeking domination or, if they accept it, believe it to be inaccessible (Joullié and Spillane 2015: 278–283). As a result, postmodern management authors are not merely suspicious of management science for being an instrument of social oppression; rather, they dismiss it altogether. They deny society a stable, neutral existence and see institutions, symbols, words, and texts not as having fixed meaning or pointing to permanent entities. Rather, postmodernists analyze such components of social experience as repressive processes silencing other institutions, symbols, words, and texts, all the while promoting the agendas of their incumbents or of those who author them. In the postmodern worldview, there cannot be a science of management because the objectivity demanded by SFP research is a delusion, a mirage: what passes for reality is in fact a fabrication, a socially constructed illusion, a lie. In particular, organizational life is politically motivated, a scene on which vested interests constantly play out and collide, in any case an experience escaping passive or neutral recording.

While there are merits to a critical view of organizational life, it is easier to understand what postmodern management researchers oppose than what they propose, if anything. This impotence is mainly the consequence of their radical (anti-) epistemological stance that condemns them to an anti-performative position. Rejecting the idea that organizational reality exists as a permanent object of study, postmodern management scholars find themselves incapable of recommending a course of action, be it to fellow management academics or managers. In the absence of stable, causally effective social structures, there is indeed no ground upon which a theory could develop. If postmodern management authors are correct in their views of social reality, their work itself stems from and embodies an ideology that is politically motivated, that is, oppressive in its intentions. Surprisingly, however, this insurmountable difficulty has not prevented some postmodern management authors from proposing practical advice to managers and academic peers (see Donaldson (2003) for an extended discussion on this theme).

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## The Collapse of Theory

The ethical, logical, epistemological, and ontological difficulties met by researchers in social science have been long documented (e.g., Giedymin 1975). In fact, it was their progressive articulation (in the hands of Weber, Adorno, Horkheimer, and

Popper, most notably) that spurred the development of the different versions of social research that Burrell and Morgan mapped. Various strategies are available to mitigate the difficulties that each research paradigm generates (see especially Johnson and Duberley 2000; see also Boisot and McKelvey 2010; Wicks and Freeman 1998; Gioia and Pitre 1990). Rather than these well-travelled themes, the following explores an overlooked aspect of management research's difficulties.

The main issues social researchers face in their work stem from the influence that they inevitably exert on the agents the behavior of whom they study, the complexity of social phenomena, the impossibility of studying them in laboratory conditions, and the challenge of identifying control groups before conducting experiments. Considered together, these difficulties rule out explanations of social events similar to those advanced in the natural sciences, which are in terms of causes and effects of these causes. As Andreski (1969: 58) observed, at most, in social sciences, only "possibilistic" explanations can be advanced, that is, explanations why something could happen, not why it happened, let alone why it had to happen. In other words, in social science, explanations do not express sufficient conditions of occurrence of an event (causal explanation), but necessary conditions of occurrence. As such, explanations of social phenomena are not predictive and thus cannot be performative (On this account, there cannot be theory in social science, and "social science" is itself an oxymoronic expression. For an extended discussion on this theme, see Gellner 1986: 101–127); see also Morgenbesser (1970).). Moreover, if one accepts the reality of free will, i.e., if one understands that human behavior is by nature unpredictable, then one must also accept that causal explanations of social events are impossible in all cases where these events are determined by the choices of one or a handful of individuals. Such is typically the case in management situations where decision-making rests with one or a small number of people.

If the indeterminacy of human actions vitiates the possibility of causal explanations, it follows that the possibility of causal explanation requires that human actions are predictable. Expressed differently, the quest for performative (because causal) management theories must assume a degree of psychological determinism, at least on the part of those to whom the theories apply. For example, in *For Positivist Organization Theory*, Donaldson (1996) argues that organizational decisions are entirely contingent on phenomena over which managers and executives have little or no control, such as general economic conditions, competitors' offering, legal constraints, or simply shareholders' expectations. There is therefore no such thing as strategic choice. Managerial free will, if it exists, is of negligible consequence; trying to account for it in management studies is a pointless endeavor. If true, such a deterministic view of organizational reality leaves little room for such widely debated notions as business ethics and corporate social responsibility. Scholars engaged in these latter research agendas are mistaken in their efforts.

Even if they do not share Donaldson's positivist commitment, management theorists, irrespective of their research paradigm, share his view on human agency, knowingly or not. This is the case because if organizational reality is structured along stable and causally effective features (be they buried in the depths of human consciousness), then organizational life is ultimately determined in some aspects.

These aspects are the phenomena that management researchers study, the occurrences of which their theories describe and predict. It is thus possible to determine future occurrences of the phenomena the theories encompass, like the behavior of elementary particles is predictable and controllable by way of the electromagnetic forces theorized by physicists. As discussed, postmodern management scholars escape these comments at the cost of being incapable of proposing any management theory at all.

Being performative, management research, irrespective of its paradigm, requires and implies a degree of psychological determinism. Yet, bar for theorists like Donaldson, most management scholars do not realize this implication, as their concern for managerial and corporate responsibility attests. It thus behooves the present commentator to explain the discrepancy between what management researchers actually do and what most of them profess they do. Although such an argument requires more sustained development than space affords here, I submit in the following paragraphs that management authors do not recognize the psychological determinism implied in their research and conveyed by their theories because they obfuscate it, presumably unwittingly, behind a cloud of equivocations, ambiguities, tautologies, and imprecise language.

Scholarly management and organization studies offer equivocations aplenty. Although a systematic survey of the concerned literature is normally required to substantiate such an assertion, three examples will suffice to provide it credibility and prosecute the present case. They pertain to the use of “authority,” “personality,” and “motivation,” three terms that are pervasive in management literature.

“Authority” is an ambiguous word that management authors generally leave undefined. Dictionaries (e.g., the *Merriam-Webster* online dictionary, accessed on 14 March 2018) acknowledge this ambiguity when they define the term as “the power to influence or command thought, opinion, or behaviour.” To influence is not to command, however: the former verb leaves room for subjective interpretation and thus psychological freedom; the latter does not and implies necessary obedience by way of psychological control. Thus, when Rojas (2010: 1264) writes in his study of academic authority “some actors [...] seek the authority to coerce others” and that “connections help individuals acquire the legitimate authority to influence events” (2010: 1265), he equivocates on the two meanings of the term and leaves the practical implications of his theory uncertain. Such an equivocation is doubly convenient. First, should the theory be implemented, the equivocation protects the theorist from the charge that his research does not result in employee coercion. Second and more to the point of the current discussion, the equivocation presumably leaves the same theorist unaware of the deterministic implications of his theory. Had the meaning of “authority” been clarified or a less ambiguous word like “power” or “control” been used, these implications would have been either avoided or made apparent.

“Personality” is a concept central to managerial psychology and to a large component of management and organizational behavior literature. Although there are over 200 different definitions of personality (Spillane and Martin 2005: 71), most of them advance personality as a stable psychological structure or process that confers

individual behavior an overall degree of consistency. In this perspective, personality explains (i.e., causes) behavioral regularities (McRae and Costa 1996: 57–58). The concept of personality thus assumes that there are aspects of behavior that remain beyond the volition of the individuals. Notwithstanding claims to the contrary, the psychological determinism of personality theories is particularly evident when personality is viewed as a bundle of stable traits (dispositions) existing within the person and controlling his or her behavior (Clarke 2009). Indeed, behavioral predictions based on the results of personality tests have been a major goal and justification of personality research since its beginnings (Baritz 1960: 21–41).

The psychological determinism implied in personality psychology is not without consequences on personal freedom, intelligence, and creativity. If individuals behave as per fixed psychological structures beyond their control, they are not completely free and thus not entirely responsible for what they do: they behave in ways constrained by their personality. It is illusory to expect from them behavior outside of the range of activities that their personality allows. The narrower the range of activities in which the concerned individuals can engage, the more consistent their behavior remains regardless of environmental conditions. In other words, the stronger the personality, the less intelligent (in the sense of adaptive) and the less creative the individual. Although this argument is of sound logic and in accord with explanations of aberrant or deviant behavior in terms of personality factors or mental illnesses (Spillane and Martin 2005: 72–74), it is not widely recognized by management authors. This confusion is evident in the use of such oxymoronic expressions as “creative personality” (Oldham and Cummings 1996), “imaginative personality” (Kartono et al. 2017), and again “intelligent personality” (Bartone et al. 2009), which are common in management and management-related literature (One influential (about 500 citations) study even mentions the concept of “responsible personality” (Berkowitz and Lutterman 1968)).

Lastly, “motivation” is a concept often found in management and organizational behavior articles and textbooks, if generally left without a clear definition. When a definition is provided, it is typically along the lines provided by Griffin and Moorhead (2012: 90), that is, one which conceives of motivation, in transparently physicist language, as “the set of forces that causes people to engage in one behavior rather than some alternative behaviour.” In this reading, motivation is a causally effective factor, the reach of which is inescapable: motivated employees are caused to behave as they do (i.e., they do not act but react). These individuals’ choice and free will, should they exist, are of no consequence. In ordinary language, however, motivation has a different meaning. As the *Oxford* online dictionary attests (accessed on 20 February 2018), motivation typically refers to a reason for acting in certain ways, a desire to do something, that is, a volition, a fear, an incentive, or an objective. This second definition makes room for choice and free will: if a motivation is a reason for action and not a cause for reaction, then one can change one’s behavior by changing one’s motivation. As is the case for “authority” and “personality,” the equivocation that surrounds “motivation” is convenient for management authors, for it hides, perhaps even to themselves, the determinism of their motivation theories. It also makes their theories unfalsifiable, thus unscientific in Popper’s (2004) sense,

since whatever experimental evidence produced will be compatible with the theory. Should “motivated” employees behave as expected, motivation-as-cause will figure centrally in results’ interpretation; should these same employees not behave as expected, researchers will call on motivation-as-reason when interpreting the results of their experiment.

The afore-discussed equivocations and conceptual ambiguities allow the concerned management scholars to cloak their theories in a scientific veneer. In strategic management literature, circular reasoning provides the scientific varnish. In two distinct streams of publications, Powell (2001, 2002) and Priem and Butler (2001a, b) have indeed observed that, since competitive advantages and valuable resources are only identified within successful organizations, these competitive advantages and valuable resources cannot, in and of themselves, explain these organizations’ successful performance. Implying, as Porter (1985) and countless others after him do, that competitive advantages or valuable resources produce organizational success thus amounts to implying that organizations are successful because they are successful. The proposition is true, but trivially so. It does not state a theory but only a tautology without predictive, let alone performative, quality.

Strategic management literature is not alone in advancing tautologies masquerading as scientific theories. Such propositions also abound in the “implications for practice” sections of management articles. Bartunek and Rynes (2010) reviewed 1738 empirical articles published in 5 leading management and management-related journals in 1992 and 1993 and between 2003 and 2007. Bartunek and Rynes (2010: 105) found that, overall, 74% (up to 89% for some journals, depending on the year considered) of these “implications for practice” sections rely on tentative language, that is, make use of “may,” “speculate,” “potentially,” or other words of similar meaning. Propositions expressed in this sort of language are either tautological or unfalsifiable; in either case, they have no empirical implications.

Although Bartunek and Rynes based their analysis on articles published in 1992–1993 and 2003–2007, more recent exemplars are not difficult to find, showing that the phraseology they identified is still prevalent. For instance, Su and Tsang (2015: 1143) write, as practical implications of their research, that “results suggest that firms may strategically control the scope of the secondary stakeholders in which they are interested.” The verb “suggest” signals that the proposed interpretation contains a part of subjectivity and that other researchers could interpret the same results differently; the modal “may” indicate that the opposite result is possible. If the sentence has some appearance of performativity, it has none of its core attributes, namely, objectivity and causality.

Tentative and speculative language, like the equivocations, conceptual ambiguities, and tautologies reviewed earlier, either obfuscates management literature’s inherent determinism or hollow it out of practical consequences. In both cases and crucially, such language does not convey theoretical knowledge. Sentences like “X suggests Y,” “X may cause Y,” and “X potentially triggers Y” imply that Y does necessarily follow from X and that something else, or nothing at all, can possibly follow from X. That such formulation is widespread in management literature shows that scholars, despite their intentions to identify and codify theory, have been incapable of doing so.



If management research is a quest for performativity, this goal has disappeared from its practical conclusions. When engaging in management research, scholars assume that stable, causally effective structures underpin the way organizations operate, yet the language these same scholars use to report the result of their research implicitly but unambiguously betrays the inexistence of such structures. The fact is that management researchers have yet to identify a single theory they can apply in the world of organizations with the same reliability that physicists apply theirs in the world of objects. The limitations, weaknesses, and adverse social consequences of scientific management, the first and perhaps most successful of all management “theories,” need no rehearsal here: scientific management is not the panacea, the “one best method” Taylor (1919: 25) insistently claimed it was. The promise of performativity made by management researchers has remained a promise. Except in their intentions and research hypotheses, there is no such a thing as a management theory. The failure of management theorists illustrates Gellner’s (1986: 126–127) argument that, if science is characterized by its ability to generate cumulative knowledge capable of improving human existence by way of predictions and controls (i.e., what Lyotard called science’s performativity), then the so-called social sciences (to which management studies belong) are not scientific.

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## **Conclusion: Management Scholarship for the Twenty-First Century**

The idea of management theory has had a successful run since its inception in the first decade of the twentieth century. From Taylor to Simon to Porter (and countless others), the contention that there exists a theoretical body of knowledge enabling managers reliably and predictably to improve their practice has been widely accepted. Current management education is predicated on this conception, to which tens of thousands of management researchers around the world have given flesh – or so it seems.

In scholarly literature, theory is a performative and deterministic notion. Anyone proposing a theory about natural or experimental phenomena implies that, should the conditions that presided over their initial observation persist, these phenomena will continue to occur as they have occurred and can thus be controlled or at minimum predicted. Proposing a theory about given phenomena thus amounts to claiming that the behavior of these phenomena is predictable, that is, somehow determined. Applying the notion of theory to management and organizational concerns thus requires, implies, and conveys the idea that the phenomena management researchers study are determined in some essential but inescapable ways. Organizations, however, are made of people; management is, ultimately, the management of people. The notion of theory applied to management phenomena involves a deterministic picture of human agency, one in which human beings, in some ways at least, do not act but merely react and do not behave as they wish but as they must.

To escape the psychological determinism that is inherent to the structural-functional-positivist research agenda, management theorists have developed

alternative ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions upon which to conduct research. Despite incommensurability claims by their advocates, these competing research frameworks come together in one crucial assumption: they all rely on the existence of underlying stable and causally effective features of organizational life upon which it is possible to develop management theories. Scholars for whom this comment does not hold are postmodern management researchers for whom there are no fixed structures in social reality and therefore no basis upon which to ground theory. Postmodern management scholars escape the charge of determinism, only to face that of practical paralysis and empirical irrelevance.

Except for a few hard-core positivists such as Donaldson, management scholars do not openly commit to the idea of psychological determinism – in fact, most of them typically deny such a commitment. Nevertheless, if management theories were not deterministic in at least some of their aspects, there would not be any way to justify their performativity and consequently their teaching in management schools. It is only because management theories are supposedly performative that their knowledge is meant to enable managers to improve their practice and management graduates to pretend to management positions.

Willingly or not, knowingly or not, management scholars obfuscate their commitment to psychological determinism thanks to equivocations, conceptual ambiguities, tautologies, speculative wording, and tentative language when reporting their theories. Constructs such as “personality” and “motivation,” common in management literature, demand psychological determinism to be used as support of theories, yet are often employed as if it was not the case, obscuring their meaning. The notion of “authority” and specifically its articulation with the concepts of “power” and “control” is rarely, if ever, elucidated, leaving its practical implication uncertain. Circular reasoning is at the heart of competitive advantage and valuable resource theories, carving them out of practical relevance. As for the sections of articles that spell out the practical implications of research, they rely in their vast majority on a language that denudes them of predictive application. Their theoretical content is only apparent and their performativity inexistent. The quest for management theory has failed.

A handful of scholars have perceived that management studies are facing a crisis of theory (Ghoshal 2005); that current management scholarship is mostly irrelevant to theory, practice (George 2014), and teaching (Pearce and Huang 2012); and that management academia is facing an existential and legitimacy crisis (Khurana 2007). Management academia must reinvent itself if it wants to survive these crises. If this reinvention goes through the abandonment of theory to make room for managerial freedom and responsibility, then so be it. In any case, forfeiting the claim to theoretical knowledge will not be at management studies’ cost. If the pursuit of theory cannot be reconciled with a world picture in which managers act, choose, and are responsible for their decisions, then so much the worse for theory. Scholars sensitive to this line of argument will remember, however, that such an abandonment of theory must remain compatible with management academia’s claim to instrumentality, if not to its promise of performativity. That is, unless they are ready to embrace

critical management authors' practical irrelevance quagmire, scholars must find ways to make their research useful, if not predictive, to managers. The work of Peter Drucker, who never claimed to have a theory of management (and insisted there would never be such a thing; cf. Drucker 1986: 39), shows in the most convincing of ways that such an endeavor is possible.

The time has come for an a-theoretical management scholarship to emerge or, rather, to rise from the structural-functional-positivist grave in which Simon and others buried it. For more than 2000 years, education for community citizenship and leadership was based on *studia humanitatis*, the branches of knowledge that investigate how people document and make sense of human experience. To prepare himself for a senior administrative position, Machiavelli, to take one famous example, studied Latin, rhetoric, logic, diplomacy, history, and moral philosophy (Skinner 1981). Such an education provides analytical and critical methods of inquiry rooted in an appreciation of diverse human values, skills that managers, as decision-makers, require (Tomey 2009).

Further, to the extent that management is a linguistic activity, to learn management is to learn to speak and to think (a form of self-talk) clearly and convincingly about matters at hand. Doing this requires that one appreciates the tenets and conceptions, especially when these concern human nature, implied and conveyed by the terms one uses to frame the problems one is trying to solve. As the present analysis of the concept of management theory shows, such a liberating endeavor is impossible in the obscurity of an imprecise language, in the absence of moral and aesthetic references, or in the chaotic outline of a world grasped outside of its intellectual and historical origins. Mastery of language supports the use of reason, encourages critical argument, and produces mature individuals. The critical evaluation of assumptions brings about the awareness of alternatives: intellectual freedom, citizenship engagement, and moral leadership have no other possible origins.

In human affairs, ambiguity is the norm and necessity of behavior never encountered (one can always choose, if only how to die). If their environment is complex, human beings are even more so, because their decisions always contain an irrational and emotional element that makes them unpredictable. Despite Simon's assertions to the contrary, mathematical models cannot adequately represent human endeavors. Rather than looking for an elusive (and humanly demeaning) management theory, scholars can contribute to management thought. Expressed differently, rather than trying to predict management phenomena by way of theories, management scholars can try to understand them. Instead of searching for causes, researchers have the option to expose and clarify reasons, those that led to executive choices and managerial actions, taking into account objectives, situational constraints, and material contingencies. Elucidating past decisions of managers, their tenets, and their glorious or inglorious outcomes reveals what alternatives these managers could have pursued and what other opportunities were available to them. Defeats are humbling, successes are fleeting, and possibilities are attractive but elusive; all, however, are sources of learning. A vast and fertile research agenda beckons.

## Cross-References

- ▶ [A Return to the Good Old Days: Populism, Fake News, Yellow Journalism, and the Unparalleled Virtue of Business People](#)
- ▶ [Introduction: Public Policy Failure, the Demise of Experts, and the Dawn of a New Era](#)
- ▶ [Labor and Employment Practices: The Rise and Fall of the New Managerialism](#)
- ▶ [Management History in the Modern World: An Overview](#)
- ▶ [The New Executive: Interconnected Yet Isolated and Uninformed – Leadership Challenges in the Digital Pandemic Epoch](#)
- ▶ [Trade Union Decline and Transformation: Where to for Employment Relations?](#)
- ▶ [What Is Management?](#)
- ▶ [Why Did the Great Recession Fail to Produce a \*New New Deal\* in the USA?](#)

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