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A Critical Realist Pathway to Relevant and Ethical Research

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Introduction

Previous research has used critical realism to develop a characterization of knowledge that recognizes the diverse ways in which human beings may be said "to know" (Archer et al. 2013; Mingers 2008). Related to the diverse ways and forms of knowing, their practical utility and ethical dimensions are of increasing interest to scholars and practitioners (Booker et al. 2008; Denzin and Giardina 2016; Fletcher et al. 2016). The research–practice gap is of growing concern for academics and managers, not least because the recent global economic crisis can be seen to some extent as resulting from traditional MBA-type education within business schools (Reed 2009; Welsh and Dehler 2007). Previous studies (e.g., Bansal et al. 2012; Lion et al. 2013) have indicated that there is often little resemblance between management research and its practice in organizations. Nonaka and Toyama (2003) suggest that knowledge creation may be seen as a dialectical process, in which various contradictions are synthesized through dynamic interactions among individuals, the organization, and the environment. Although the research– practice gap is widely recognized and frequently lamented, barring some notable exceptions

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(e.g., Cross et al. (2013) use organizational network analysis to address the gap), there is not much discussion about how it can be bridged. Khurana (2007) has documented the way in which US schools have changed from being wide-ranging "professional schools" to becoming training grounds for narrowly based technocratic managers. Starkey and Tiratsoo (2007) argue that the main problem with business schools is that the focus on teaching has given way to one primarily concerned with research, but research that is of a particular kind—highly academic and theoretical and divorced from practice. For example, Lion et al. (2013) note that research on environmental impact assessment has been conducted mostly from a governmental perspective, producing a clear gap between research development and business practice. Similar concerns, although often with varying solutions, have been expressed by Thomas and Cornuel (2011, 2012), Starkey and Tempest (2009), Wilson and Thomas (2012), Hodgkinson and Rousseau (2009), and Hodgkinson and Starkey (2011).

Van de Ven and Johnson (2006) suggest that there are three ways in which the research–practice gap has been considered: as a knowledge production problem where insufficient attention is paid to the context and potential purposes of their research; as a knowledge transfer problem wherein little or no attention is paid to making the results of their research practically relevant and communicable; or as a philosophical problem of incommensurability between very different *Weltanschauungen*. These aspects of the situation are also indicated in previous studies which suggest that it is not actually the width of the research–practice gap that schools and policy-makers should pay attention to, but rather the lack of sufficient bridging mechanisms to span research and practice (Syed et al. 2010; see also Anderson 2005).

For scholars who wish to improve the research–practice relevance by enhancing knowledge transfer, Starkey and Madan (2001: S6) portray the interplay between science and practice by using a "knowledge chain." According to this chain, knowledge—which can be jointly developed by practitioners and scholars—influences managerial decision making and subsequently effective action. The guiding principles of this chain are "that knowledge should inform action; and that action becomes knowable if we understand better the underlying principles that link cause and effect" (p. S6). Although Starkey and Madan support the idea of interaction between science and practice when it comes to knowledge creation and its dissemination, the underlying assumption is that knowledge flows from theory to practice in an almost unhindered way. Thus, the achievement of relevance itself is not considered to be a big problem. Even though Starkey and Madan (2001) and others (e.g., Buckley et al. 1998) have provided important and much welcomed

insights on the relevance of management research, the reality is far more complex than is suggested by the rather linear models of knowledge transfer that underlie these contributions. There is a research deficit when it comes to better understanding how the systems of research and practice interact with each other, whether they can interact at all, and what this means for our understanding of relevance.

This chapter adopts a critical realist (CR) perspective to develop a nondeterministic notion of resolving research–practice inconsistencies within the field of business and management. Such inconsistencies manifest themselves in a variety of ways such as in performative contradictions or simply a mismatch between theory and empirical evidence (Bhaskar 1978, 1998; Tourish 2013). Although, ideally, it may be possible to tackle and resolve research–practice inconsistencies through the conventional cyclical process of scientific practice, some inconsistencies may be rather intractable, defying resolution due to deeper, more fundamental issues (Smith 2006). We argue that in the case of intractable situations, a CR perspective may help us understand and possibly resolve the disjuncture of theory and practice, and positivism and interpretivism, through a new set of ontological premises.

We explore a CR perspective in solving problems related to the ontological and causal underpinnings of management research. We argue that, despite their merits, both positivism and interpretivism, the dominant management research paradigms, provide impoverished and reductionist ontologies that fail to deal with the depth and complexity of the world that managers face. This, then, has implications for research design, where we argue that multiple research methods, in a CR fashion, may be needed to do justice to the differentiated nature of social and organizational reality. We further argue that the adoption of CR brings with it an explicit ethical dimension that is currently lacking in positivism and at most implicit in interpretivism. We consider the effects of commercial and practical constraints on management research and consultancy, which in the main prioritize strategic and short-term business outcomes with relatively less attention paid to a holistic view of business in a society. Such literature and practices, we argue, in turn serve to aggravate the gap between academic research focused on social aspects of management and actual practice which at times may ignore the social implications of management.

The chapter is structured as follows. First, we discuss the research–practice gap and the ontological component of the business research explaining why a CR paradigm may offer a better alternative than the currently dominant approaches. We explain the need for plurality of theoretical and methodological frameworks which are both constructed in accordance with CR ideas and

capable of empirical application in a substantive area of enquiry. Finally, we discuss how the adoption of CR brings with it an explicit ethical dimension which is either lacking or implicit in other approaches.

The Research–Practice Gap

In this section, we discuss the gap between academic research and practical problems and highlight that many real-world problems are both too complex and too interdisciplinary to be understood and resolved by puritanical approaches that may lead to non-practical outcomes.

The Growing Gulf

Many of the concerns about the research–practice gap, certainly from a practitioner's perspective, are summarized in an article in the *Financial Times* on the "growing gulf" between managers and research (Ghobadian 2010; see also Tenhiälä et al. 2016). Ghobadian notes that one significant concern is the gap between the values and ideologies of researchers and users—that is, academics, students, consultants, policy-makers, and managers. Ghobadian (2010: last para.) argues that unless researchers pay greater attention to the needs of practicing managers, "the impact of management research will lessen and the gap between researchers and users will in time become a chasm."

Ghobadian's concern is reminiscent of Astley and Zammutto's (1992) engagement with the argument that business school research is largely ignored by practitioners and that its impact on practice is perceived to be almost irrelevant. Astley and Zammutto explain this apparent lack of relevance in terms of the fact that management research and practice each have their own specialized forms of discourse, their distinct linguistic traditions. The transfer of knowledge between the research and practice domains, therefore, cannot take place in such simple terms as researchers telling managers what to do based on their empirical investigations. Moisander and Stenfors (2009) have described how differences in epistemic culture may complicate communication and cooperation between academics and practitioners (e.g., in the context of modernist management scholars and contemporary post-bureaucratic knowledge organizations). In other words, whenever management research is used as the foundation for practice, it requires a considerable amount of reformulation. In effect, in order to make basic management research work, it has to be radically reinterpreted by managers in accordance with the requirements of the organizational context of practical application (Gruber and Niles 1975).

The Ontological Epistemological Components of Business Research

Ghobadian (2010) suggests that much academic research, especially that aimed at four-star journals, tends to be highly quantitative and positivistic, and somewhat alien to practicing managers. He suggests that qualitative, interpretive research is "closer to the methods that most managers use" (para. 7). From a CR perspective, we would suggest that, individually, both are necessary, if not sufficient, to help us understand and try to steer the complex world we now inhabit. Vast amounts of data and information are routinely available (now recognized by the term "big data" (George et al. 2014)) and quantitative methods are necessary to help us make sense of the stories that may be hidden within. At the same time, the increasingly diffracted and globalized world makes it ever more necessary to recognize the many different perspectives, viewpoints, and *Weltanschauungen* through which managers experience their daily lives.

In his theorization of engaged scholarship, Van de Ven (2007) argues for a participative form of research that emphasizes the interaction between scientists and practitioners. The author highlights the need to acknowledge that practitioners, as sources of problems and data as well as users of solutions devised by scholars, are important stakeholders in scholarship (see also Van de Ven and Johnson 2006). Similarly, in their endeavor to enhance the relevance of management research, Schultz and Hatch (2005) suggest that instead of aspiring to translate their theoretically derived knowledge into practical solutions (e.g., consulting tools, new management practices), researchers should tap into practical knowledge in order to produce better theories.

This view is also shared by Whittington et al. (2001) who regard theory and practice as a more tightly linked duality; they argue that this "greater sensitivity towards practical complexity will promote a more comprehensive notion of rigor" (p. 486). In other words, there is to be no softening of academic standards. The practical working out of the duality of theory and practice will raise the stakes considerably in terms of the social production of knowledge. Pettigrew (2001) notes that the action steps to resolve the older dichotomy of theory and practice were often portrayed with the minimal request for management researchers to engage with practitioners through more accessible dissemination. However, dissemination occurs too late if the wrong question has been asked. A wider and deeper form and range of engagement between management researchers and practitioners is needed (Pettigrew 2001: S67, 2011).

Put crudely, positivism reduces the real world to the world of empirical data, thereby denying the existence of structures and mechanisms which may

not be directly perceptible, while interpretivism reduces the world to our knowledge or beliefs about it, thereby denying the existence of objects of that knowledge. Neither by itself is helpful for addressing the practical concerns of managers. Positivism is interested in holding facts separate from values, by separating the way the world is from the way it ought to be. Intrinsic in social sciences is a belief that research is to remain ethically committed (e.g., David Hume's philosophy presented in Kolakowski 1968).

However, despite its merit, the proposal of paying greater attention to the needs of practicing managers is not without certain pitfalls. For example, in some instances (such as in cases of ethical and social concern), the needs or priorities of practicing managers may not (and should not) serve as an adequate goalpost or benchmark for academic research. Similarly, by virtue of their very different "clients" (students for academics, and consumers for practicing managers), it may not be assumed that the needs and priorities of researchers and users will always converge (Cornelissen and Lock 2002, 2005).

This view is also supported by Kieser and Leiner (2009) who highlight the "unbridgeability" of the rigor–relevance gap in management research. The authors suggest that researchers and practitioners cannot collaboratively produce research that is rigorous as well as relevant; they can only cause irritations to each other which may occasionally turn out to be inspiring. Indeed, practicing managers are subject to many pressures and real-life constraints (e.g., changes in consumer behavior and regulatory requirements, economic recession, mergers and acquisitions) which do not directly affect academic researchers, who may have the relative luxury of focusing not only on business goals but also on social implications of management strategies.

A Critical Realist Perspective

CR deals with critical application of realism which produces a stratified understanding of the world, dividing the *real* from the *actual,* and the *empirical*, and the structures and mechanisms that produce events, from the events themselves (Bhaskar 1998; Jefferies 2011). From a CR view, there is a reality independent of our subjective thinking about it that science can study.

CR combines depth ontology (that there are real, generative mechanisms and structures underlying events and our human phenomenal experience) with epistemological relativism (that knowledge is a social product, and consequently, there is no ahistorical and non-contextual vantage point from which to determine the truth-value and criteria for rationality). Ontological being in the world is approached and understood as a depth ontology, entail-

ing that we distinguish between three levels of reality: the empirical—the relatively small number of events that we observe and record; the actual—the wider set of all events that do (or do not, even if expected) occur; and the real—the encompassing domain of structures and mechanisms that causally generate the actual events. At each stratum, ontological features qua generative mechanisms hold real, actual, and empirical characteristics, and are susceptible to scientific investigation in accordance with CR's philosophical materialist framework (Davis 2011). Such an approach enables us to better understand and explain why things are and also encourages the use of multiple methods on real problems.

Although ideally it may be possible to resolve research–practice inconsistencies through the conventional cyclical process of scientific practice, some inconsistencies may defy resolution due to deeper, more fundamental issues. We argue that in the case of intractable situations, a CR perspective may help us understand and possibly resolve the disjuncture of theory and practice, and positivism and interpretivism, through a new set of ontological premises.

The Case for Critical Realism

We argue that CR has a strong realist ontology, acknowledging the existence of a causally efficacious external world of structures and mechanisms, not all of which may be perceptible (the real), that generate the events and occurrences of daily life (the actual), a subset of which we observe and experience (the empirical). However, CR also accepts that we only ever have partial or limited access to the world through our perceptual and linguistic capabilities so that knowledge will always be epistemically relative and fallible (Bhaskar 1978). CR also accepts that the social world is inherently different from the physical world, which places further limitations on our access to it (Bhaskar 1979). The following are the main characteristics of CR relevant to the concerns of this chapter.

CR has a stratified model of reality in which the domain of observable, measurable, empirical events is a subset of all the events that actually do occur (Tourish 2013). These, in turn, result from the interplay of underlying structures and mechanisms, of many different kinds—physical, social, and cognitive—each of which has particular powers or tendencies to act and behave in particular ways (generative causality). The scientific logic of CR is therefore neither purely inductivist, constructing general laws that cover particular empirical instances, nor purely deductivist, deducing particular consequences from known or assumed axioms, but rather it is "abductive" (Peirce 1878) or

"retroductive." That is, it proceeds from some accepted event or observation in the empirical domain to try and understand and explain why this has occurred by hypothesizing potential explanatory mechanisms which, *if they existed,* would indeed account for the observations. It then tries to test which of these does actually exist and may be operative. CR is thus both creative and rigorous.

This approach, we believe, ties in very well with real-world issues: it recognizes their inherent complexity and multidimensionality; it accepts both the "hard," material and the "soft," human aspects of problem situations; and its notions of generative causality and retroduction mirror in many ways our commonsense approach to understanding and explaining puzzling events.

We can illustrate these features with some examples from the literature. Volkoff et al. (2007) looked at the relations between technology and organizational change using a three-year study of enterprise systems implementation. They found that neither technological determinist nor constructivist approaches such as actor–network theory could adequately explain their findings and used CR to explain the process of change in three stages in which the ostensive, performative, and material aspects interacted differently at each stage. Along similar lines, Mutch (2010) uses CR to analyze the effects of developments in information and communication technologies on organizational structure, particularly emphasizing the need to disaggregate technology into a range of features and levels so that their interactions can be explored.

Wry (2009) suggests that the area of business and society scholarship (which is clearly highly relevant to the theory and practice debate) has been held back because of its underpinnings in either economic theory, which tries to demonstrate links between social responsibility and profitability, or moral theory, which argues that organizations should be socially responsible for purely normative reasons. He argues that a combination of CR together with neo-institutional theory can generate a much richer and more realistic theory which grounds the normative ethos in real organizational mechanisms rather than just appealing to the manager's moral or economic values.

Welsh and Dehler (2007), in another highly relevant contribution, analyze the lack of change and development in the business school (and particularly the MBA) curriculum over 20 years despite this model's manifest lack of success in the real world. They use CR to identify the underlying generative mechanisms that both necessitate and constrain change and reinvention. Finally, Fleetwood and Hesketh (2006) consider why it has proved so difficult to demonstrate a measurable link between the human resources practices of an organization and its performance. They argue that this is primarily because of the pre-eminence of positivistic, "scientific" approaches which emphasize

quantification at the expense of the development of an adequate theory with the proper degree of explanatory power.

CR allows for the resolution of the research–practice inconsistencies through a reinterpretation of the activity of research. It offers a notion of causality that is consistent with the quest for answering the underlying "why" questions posed in business research (Bhaskar 1978, 1998). It also provides interpretivists with an ontology that strongly asserts the crucial role of meanings, interpretation, and context. In doing so, CR allows for the pursuit of an interpretivist agenda without denying the existence of the subject under study or its role in regulating research (Smith 2006).

We consider CR useful in recognizing the existence of logical connections between the ontological, epistemological, and methodological premises of research. A CR perspective is more likely to produce coherent studies than is uncritical pragmatism, which may ignore such linkages. Paradoxically, CR can also be seen as epistemologically pluralist because, in reconceptualizing the ontological basis of inquiry, problems associated with the mixing of alternative metaphysics may be circumvented (Lipscomb 2008).

Scott's (2000) critique of school effectiveness research and mathematical modeling provides useful examples of how CR can be utilized to show the practically inadequate and often vacuous philosophical bases of approaches dominating the educational research and policy agendas. While both positivism and interpretivism have their unique features and strengths (e.g., in positivism, the development and testing of hypotheses in a manner that is both quantifiable and replicable, and in interpretivism, the attention to understanding the individual experience), both these paradigms, taken by themselves, have severe limitations in terms of their ontological presuppositions.

Informed by CR theory, this chapter underscores the need to enhance the ontological component of business research in order to bring it in line with the CR natural and social realism as well as the concepts of structures and generative mechanisms (Dobson 2002; Mingers 2004a, c).

Theoretical and Methodological Plurality

Ghobadian (2010: para. 10) notes that "the values encouraged by the Research Assessment Exercise—REF's predecessor—and the promotion criteria militate against impact. The reward system is skewed towards publishing in four-star journals where such articles are overwhelmingly quantitative and the presentation style is geared to peer group needs. Only a minority of schools genuinely value impact, devoting resources and offering incentives so that managers

can access their research." This, Ghobadian (2010: para. 2) notes, is despite the fact that "[p]racticing managers rely on knowledge acquired through experience, rather than specific formal training, to judge research. Qualitative research is closer to the method most managers use to acquire knowledge and is therefore more likely to be adopted."

To overcome the disjuncture of theory and practice and positivism, it is not sufficient to simply recognize that there are different yet equally valid research paradigms. In the same way that the complexity of real-world problems requires a degree of interdisciplinarity, it also requires the use of a variety of different research methods—mixed-method research (Tashakkori and Teddlie 2003) or multimethodology (Mingers and Gill 1997). While there is a growing acceptance in principle of the value of multimethodology (see, e.g., a major business research methods text such as Bryman and Bell (2003)), there is still a degree of resistance by top journals (Mingers 2003) and grant-awarding bodies. This relates to the conservative and disciplining nature of the disciplines and to the battles over paradigm incommensurability which are still being fought (Mingers 2004b).

CR may be seen as a philosophical tradition committed to "under-laboring" for substantive theories, for example, by helping to clarify concepts. Accordingly, various extant theories may be integrated to design research and understand its implication, drawing ideas from CR. For example, there has been a call for those in the neo-institutionalist tradition to engage more with critical management (Lawrence et al. 2009). Scholars have also pointed towards emerging issues such as the performative potential of the critical agenda and the way it can be released (Spicer et al. 2009).

The importance of critically developing the research design cannot be overstated. This may involve questions such as whether the research design (Clarke 2003): (1) is appropriate to the domain and the phenomena being studied; (2) reflects the state of knowledge at commencement, both of the domain and of research methodology; (3) combines research techniques in such a manner that the weaknesses of each are complemented by the strengths of the others; and (4) is practicable. Furthermore, it may involve asking whether the research is likely to produce data that: (1) reflect the phenomena under study; (2) can be subjected to validation testing; (3) can have powerful techniques applied to them to tease out the relationships among the variables; (4) are likely to produce results relevant to the world; (5) are likely to be accessible to prospective users and audiences; and (6) are innovative and interesting. Clarke (2003) argues that considering these questions will ensure that scholars are focused not only on the rationality of the research product but also the rationality of the research process.

In his study of the "standard" accounts of research in information sciences, Smith (2006) recasts one such debate in light of CR assumptions: technological determinism versus social construction of technology. Smith proposes that a CR ontology allows for one reinterpretation of the activity of science as implicitly predicated upon natural and social realism as well as the concepts of structures and generative mechanisms. Similarly, in their exploration of the notion of CR in the nursing profession, McEvoy and Richards (2003) found CR to be particularly useful to evaluate front-line services seeking to use evidence-based interventions, as interventions need to be properly understood if they are to be used effectively in the context of clinical practice. Tourish (2013) notes that while CR acknowledges epistemological relativism, it also accepts the need to construct robust causal explanations for social phenomena.

Scott (2000) confronts beliefs in this approach with four main problems: the ways in which systematic unpredictability undermines predictive claims; its misunderstanding of the nature of open and closed systems; its conflation of association with causation; and its wholesale neglect of the intentionality of social life. To do so, however, requires ideas similar to those proposed by Bourdieu's (1990, 1996) relational theory and Bernstein's (1996) theory of the structuring of pedagogic discourse. Such concepts may be used in conjunction with a CR approach to bridge the research–practice gap, and to help empirically describe and analyze the object of study (Maton 2001).

The foregoing has highlighted the need for plurality of theoretical and methodological frameworks which are both constructed in accordance with CR ideas and capable of empirical application in practical research of a substantive area of enquiry, such as business education and practice. One useful approach can be found in Archer's (1995) characterization of relations between the philosophical underpinnings, theoretical and methodological approaches, and concrete empirical studies. According to Archer's perspective, "explanatory methodology" serves to regulate the relationship between social ontology and empirical research. In other words, the procedures of disciplines provide the means for the translation of CR principles into and realization within substantive studies. Maton (2001) argues that CR and educational research need each other. Ill-conceived policy decisions based on tacit empiricism shape the working conditions of educators and researchers, and the relentless march of technicist managerialism shows no signs of abating. Here, then, is an area of enquiry where CR can make a real difference not only to a narrow and muddled intellectual terrain but also to the daily lives of practitioners by providing the philosophical basis for and legitimation of alternative approaches and practices.

The Ethical Presuppositions of CR

A critical realist consideration in our perspective on the research–practice gap is the issue of values and ethics in management decision making. In this section, we address this more directly. In the past, decisions could be made purely in the interests of profit, shareholder value, or even managerial reward, and this was supported by the business school curriculum based on economic rationality and technical modeling. Philosophically, this was underpinned by positivism, with its absolute separation of facts from values and economics from morality. This was not always so, and it is ironic that Adam Smith, whose work is often assumed to support of the separation of market economics from ethical considerations, did not think that at all. His first major work, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Smith 2002 (orig. 1759)), was a treatise on the fundamentally moral nature of human action and this work underpinned his more famous discourse on the economic system, *The Wealth of Nations* (Smith 2008 (orig. 1776)).

The usual alternative to positivism, interpretivism, does not fare much better since its subjectivism and its individualism give it no external standpoint from which moral judgments can be made. CR is different in that it rejects the Humean demarcation between fact and values, and argues that social science is unavoidably evaluative and committed (Bhaskar 1986; Mingers 2009).

CR's view of morality has two main principles:

- *moral realism*, that is, that there are moral truths independent of the subjective views of individuals or traditions, ultimately grounded in characteristics of human nature;
- *ethical naturalism*, which implies that we can, through social science, discover what these moral truths are. This requires us to move from facts, how things are, to values, how things ought to be.

Traditionally, science has rested on the premise that facts and values are separable, and science is only concerned with facts—and, following Hume, that you cannot logically derive an "ought" from an "is." The first argument below establishes that (social) science is not value-free but unavoidably evaluative.

The subject matter of social science, the phenomena of the social world, is itself intrinsically value-laden, and it is wrong for social science to try and avoid this by redescribing the phenomena in neutral terms. For example, while (A) "X was murdered" and (B) "X ceased breathing" may both be true descriptions of the same event, (A) is to be preferred to (B) because: first, it is

more accurate and particular—(A) implies (B) but not vice versa; second, (B) tends to carry the presumption that X died naturally, since that is more common, when that is not in fact the case; and third, (A) maximizes the explanatory power of the theory required to explain it. Thus, (B) would only require a physical explanation of what made X stop breathing while (A) requires psychological or social explanations of the reason for the murder. This example shows that the subject matter of social science is inevitably and intrinsically value-laden and that social science is therefore properly evaluative.

The second stage is to go beyond simply being evaluative to deriving normative implications, that is, guides for action. It is the nature of social science to generate knowledge, that is, beliefs that are (at least fallibly) true. Social science studies social beliefs and is able to judge their truth or falsity, and it is able to show that there are structures within organizations and society that generate and maintain both true and false beliefs. Thus, where science can demonstrate that a widely held belief is false; identify some social mechanisms that generate or maintain the false belief; and identify actions that would change or displace the mechanisms; then, other things being equal, it can disapprove of the mechanisms and approve of actions to remove them. These arguments are further generalized in Bhaskar (1993).

The upshot of this is that CR provides an underpinning philosophy which both recognizes (against positivism) that the decisions that managers have to make in the real world are inevitably value-laden, and proposes (against interpretivism) a moral standpoint or commitment beyond the beliefs of the individuals concerned. This to some extent aligns it with critical management studies (Alvesson and Willmott 1992, 2012; Alvesson et al. 2009), which recognizes a greater degree of ambiguity between management theory and practice.

The Ethical Conduct of Researchers

While we have been arguing for a greater degree of "bridging" between management as a practice and management as a discipline, there does have to be some distance between them in order that the discipline does not simply become management training—replicating the current practices of management, whatever they may be. We have to be able to analyze, and if necessary, critique, practice, and indeed go beyond it. Yet, especially in terms of management education, it is the management discipline that is training the next generation of managers and so must be responsible for equipping them with more than simply functional techniques. Here, CR can play a major role in

demonstrating the value-full nature of social science and providing secure philosophical underpinnings for an emancipatory management studies.

Also relevant in this discussion is the ethical conduct of institutions and individual researchers. There are a multitude of factors (e.g., emphasis on journal ranking and publications, research funding, impact factor, social outreach, industry partnership, etc.), all of which may have divergent, possibly conflicting implications for management education and research. Pfeffer and Fong (2004) note that in a world beset with financial and managerial scandals, people are questioning the role of business schools in creating or "not eliminating" this behavior. According to Ghoshal (2005: 75), "business school faculty need to own up to our own role in creating *Enrons*. It is our theories and ideas that have done much to strengthen the management practices that we are all now so loudly condemning."

Ghobadian (2010: para. 1) notes that the "inclusion of impact—a measure of change that results from research—in the UK's Research Excellence Framework has prompted renewed attention on the wider purpose of research and renewed questions about why management research outcomes are not used more widely by managers." Ghobadian (2010: para. 3) further notes that "while managers value applicability above all else, researchers value logical precision and empirical validity. And this already large gap may be growing because as research techniques become more sophisticated, they are also becoming less useful for solving the practical problems of managers."

From a CR perspective, it is possible to visualize a complex interaction of different mechanisms in practice which generates certain tendencies in management education and research. For example, the Research Excellence Framework mechanism in the UK (previously known as the Research Assessment Exercise) may be seen as representing certain structural pressures on academics to produce certain desirable kinds of research in desirable forms of research output (e.g., four-star journals or research in priority areas). Furthermore, academics are expected to generate their own research income by writing and wining various research grants.

In their critical review of academic rankings, Adler and Harzing (2009) demonstrate that journal ranking systems are imbued with flaws which have defeated the fundamental purpose of social scientific research—that is, to make sense of the world. The authors highlight the folly of journal ranking, examining a number of detrimental consequences for meaningful work and several constituent academic processes, for example, research, publishing, funding, doctoral training, and career progression. According to Özbilgin (2009), journal ranking is yet another form of discriminatory practice in the higher education sector. Through his critical review of journal ranking sys-

tems, Özbilgin explains why journal ranking should be considered a significant part of the hegemonic structure of inequality in the academic labor process—as part and parcel of white masculine domination that excludes research that may be helpful in understanding the world of work and contribute to meaningful improvements for individuals and organizations.

The Ethical Conduct of Managers

From a CR perspective, management practice does not always serve as a worthy point of reference for academic theorization. Indeed, due to their very focus on profitability and competitiveness, businesses may at times be involved in conduct which may not conform to the ethical expectations or standards of the wider society.

Vranceanu's (2003) study of ethical conduct by managers in the USA (during the internet bubble years 1995–2001) investigates factors that brought about the surge in managers' unethical behavior. The study identifies weak internal control, inadequate incentives related to managers' compensation, and conflicts of interest as key structural causes of unethical behavior. Such behavior was further enhanced by the increased deregulation in the goods and financial markets.

However, changes in regulation and the economic environment may only partially explain managerial misconduct. It is equally imperative to consider the company-specific culture which may play a key role in encouraging or blocking unethical behavior. In the words of Sims and Brinkmann (2003: 246), who studied the Enron case in depth, "the company culture of individualism, innovation, and aggressive cleverness left Enron without compassionate, responsible leadership."

An example of such unethical behavior is the use of children for digital marketing. Health advocates in Australia and also in the UK have raised concerns about this new trend in which children are recruited to market products ranging from junk food to MP3 players to their friends, pushing products to their peers in the playground or on social-networking sites. This process of viral marketing and children promoting products to other children has been described as clever but insidious; children's exposure to unhealthy food messages is particularly unethical in a context of high levels of childhood obesity (Browne 2010).

There is also some evidence that the very process of goal setting, which is a key feature of the dominant pursuit of competitive advantage, may be contributing to ethical issues in organizations. In their study of the role of goal

setting in motivating unethical behavior, Schweitzer et al. (2004) found that people with unmet goals are more likely to engage in unethical behavior than are people attempting to do their best. Further, the study suggests that the relationship between goal setting and unethical behavior is particularly strong when people fall just short of reaching their goals.

It is equally important to consider ethical conduct by management consultants. Fischer (2002) argues that management consultants must satisfy two requirements which also contain two latent points of criticism: (1) the consultant must be able to solve the organizational problem that s/he is hired to solve, and (2) the solution must cohere with the interests of the client people and of the sponsor in particular. The second requirement also has an ethical aspect because of the primacy of the client's requirements and priorities over any alternative view that the consultant might hold.

According to Lapsley and Oldfield (2001), management consultants may be seen as "rational modernisers," "deomons," or "agents of change" depending upon the actual consultant and the viewpoint of the critic. However, one must not ignore the dominantly commercial orientation of management consultancy literature and practices, which in the main focus on strategic and short-term business outcomes with relatively less attention paid to a holistic view of business within a society. Such literature and practices of management consultants in turn serve to aggravate the gap between academic research focused on social aspects of management and actual practice, which at times ignores or gives inadequate attention to the social side of management.

There are thus significant limitations to and concerns about the ethical conduct of management practitioners and consultants. Corporate scandals in the USA, Australia, and elsewhere provide support for Arrow's (1974) claim that without proper regulation, the capitalist economy is likely to produce an insufficient number of positive social externalities. A related implication is that researchers must be critically aware of any unethical management practices and refrain from replicating and modeling such practices as management theories.

The foregoing discussion has highlighted ethical issues in management research and education and the causality of various structural forces in understanding the nature and scope of management scholarship. In summary, while it is possible to find some common expectations among management scholars around the world (e.g., in terms of the quality of their teaching and research), in-depth stratifications of such expectations (or requirements) may generate ethical challenges and different critical realities of management scholarship.

Discussion

This section summarizes possible implications of a CR perspective on producing knowledge which is not only practically valuable but also ethical in its conduct and outcomes. Figure 27.1 offers a schematic summary of our discussion thus far.

The issue of relevance and practical value highlighted in Fig. 27.1 is sufficiently supported by other scholars. In his critical reflection on public sociology, Burawoy (2005) argues that public sociology is concerned with setting up a dialogue with the public outside academia and its form of knowledge as reflexive (p. 17); its legitimacy being based on relevance; and its accountability being to designated publics. Burawoy (2004) juxtaposes "scientific norms" in the professional category with "relevance" in the public category. While this helps us to understand the importance of not conflating a general notion of rigor with a very specific set of disciplinary scientific norms, it is important to recognize more clearly that there are not only multiple modes of enquiry but also multiple stakeholders to be considered, who are constrained by different strategic and ethical considerations. Indeed, the issues raised by stakeholder heterogeneity are quite critical in this context. Wensley (2007) notes that it is very easy for critics to dismiss the specific topic of a piece of research as not relevant where it would be more appropriate for them to ask for evidence that there is significant interest in the research among at least a subgroup of one of the stakeholder communities. However, while there is a need to ensure that management research activities are organized so that there is more engagement with relevant stakeholders, more attention to appropriate research design and methods, and careful and systematic attention to previous evidence and theory, there is also a need to appreciate the effect of differing and sometimes conflicting demands both within business schools and more widely in the university system.

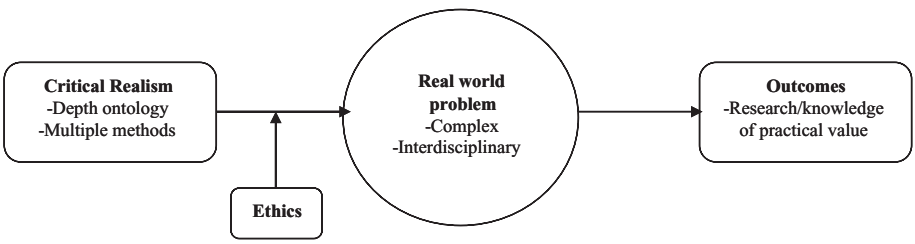

Fig. 27.1 Critical realism may enable ethical and practically valuable research

This almost certainly means that sustainable and ethical improvements will require a significant change not only in economic incentives but also a need to develop new mechanisms and institutions to reinforce the desired changes (Wensley 2007). We have explained in this chapter that a CR perspective has the capacity to ensure that the research agenda is guided by the views of the various stakeholder groups and that there is a more systematic approach to the use of cumulative empirical evidence as well as more recognition of the multifaceted nature of management research.

The history of management theory in a wide variety of domains suggests that theory has generally followed practice. That is, in the vast majority of cases, a practitioner who faces real problems that threaten his/her job and/or organization conceives of a new way of doing things and tries it out. Then, academics come along and study it, create an abstract model to describe it, and publish the model. What academics may be under pressure to do is to publish research that has been conducted within the current paradigms of their fields and—for the most part—according to the restrictive tenets of "the scientific method" as opposed to in-depth inquiries into various business phenomena. Indeed, a significant volume of academic research in the field of business is founded on the issues that can be researched by using experimental designs derived from the hard sciences. The attention of researchers is thus oriented towards selecting research questions, not the needs of practitioners. It is hardly surprising, then, that academic research may at times overlook the questions and problems that really plague practitioners.

This view is also supported by Van de Ven and Johnson (2006), who argue that the quality as well as the impact of research improves substantially when researchers do four things: (1) confront questions and issues existing in reality, (2) organize research as a collaborative learning community of scholars and practitioners, (3) conduct research that systematically examines alternative theories as well as practical formulations of the question of interest, and (4) frame the research and its findings to contribute knowledge to academic disciplines and to domains of practice (p. 815). Van de Ven and Johnson suggest that the above approach (what they term "engaged scholarship") not only enhances the relevance of research for practice but also contributes significantly to advancing research knowledge in a given domain.

Indeed, the ineluctable regulation of reality on our experience implies that research–practice contradictions will emerge when there is an incomplete philosophy. This regulation dictates that despite their stated philosophical positions, researchers often diverge from their theoretical stance and engage in good science and produce good results (Bhaskar 2002: 27–28).

It is possible to identify some important sociological implications of a CR perspective on the said gap between management practitioners and academic scholars. By virtue of its very nature, CR offers a promising approach to considering and integrating sociological implications in management research and theory. It offers a better alternative to the problems and limits of positivist empiricism, on the one hand, and postmodern linguistic constructionism and even hermeneutical interpretivism, on the other. A CR perspective may equip academic scholars as well as managers with mental retooling in order to learn well enough to not simply fall back into the old assumptions, frameworks, and paradigms of management, and to understand, predict, and possibly control (to a limited extent) any gaps that currently exist between knowledge and practice.

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