

# Supping with a Short Spoon: Suppression Inherent in Research Methodology

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Academic research is expected to be useful. Increasingly, the expectation is that it be directly and immediately useful to identified users, and that it be seen to be useful. Involving users in research demonstrates usefulness and is often a requirement of those who fund research. Fieldwork is expected, and interviewing—allowing the closest of contacts with users—encouraged. Researchers are understandably anxious to demonstrate their reliance on these methodologies, but reluctant to acknowledge the constraints they impose. It is actually very difficult to acquire and use information from interviews, and the consequence of failure to cope with these difficulties is suppression of research. Research in management studies, an area in which involvement with users is expected to be particularly close, illustrates the argument.

*Keywords: Research; users; research methodology; interview; fieldwork; management studies*

## INTRODUCTION

The argument that academic research should now be useful, an argument which has met little resistance in the UK, carries the implication that it was once useless, or at least less useful. Consequently, both academics and public funders of research are anxious that research be seen to be useful. In the UK, for example, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the government

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funding body for academic research in the social sciences, provides courses for its researchers on how they should present their research to the media.

The agenda which you have is to get publicity. (ESRC official on media training course for academics, 1991)

Desperate measures are advocated to increase the public appeal of research. In advising academics how to present their results to business, the ESRC recommends enticement. Thus, a research report entitled 'A postfordist analysis of labour relations in Bradford's clothing industry, 1963-1992' can apparently, without compromising the integrity of the research, be re-christened 'The future of labour relations in the clothing industry' (ESRC, 1995). But underlying this silliness there is serious intent. The ESRC boasts a corporate mission statement which declares it will promote research:

...placing special emphasis on meeting the needs of the users of its research and training output, thereby enhancing the United Kingdom's industrial competitiveness and quality of life. (Department of Trade and Industry, 1993: 29)

This serious intent has serious implications.

Increased workloads mean that academics cannot undertake major research without external funding. Opting out of research is hardly an option in that research performance plays a crucial part in both promotion criteria and in the formulae by which resources are allocated to universities and departments. Research funding may come direct from what is now known as the market for research, in which case the involvement of users is all too clear. But research funding from public bodies now involves users too. Research proposals must identify users and be assessed by these users in terms of the benefits the users can expect from the research. Whatever value academic research has as a public good is judged in large part in terms of its value as a private good. In a very real—and very dangerous—sense, researchers are now accountable to users. Moreover, users are to be involved in the research itself. The result is that what emerges from academic research is not a product of academics standing back and studying, but of an alliance between academics and users. Given that the latter is so influential in the funding of the former, this is not an alliance of equals.

This paper considers the suppression of research results which may occur when researchers seek to satisfy the demands of users.

The problem becomes acute when these users are also the subjects of the research and when research methodology demands close involvement with these subjects. These circumstances pertain in management studies, the area from which evidence will be drawn to support the argument presented here, and particularly when research involves interviewing, the methodology on which this paper focuses.

## THE RESEARCH CONTEXT OF FIELDWORK

If management studies is the study of what managers do, it follows that much management research entails extensive fieldwork in the organization and much questioning of managers. Fieldwork is not merely a technical exercise, a rational response to an obvious research problem (Pettigrew, 1985: 222). Fieldwork is also a social process, a matter which is often neglected by those who teach research techniques (see Hyman, 1967). Fieldwork is easily passed off as a simple means of capturing reality (Sciberras, 1986), a handy way to study the dynamics of change. Fieldwork, and particularly interviewing, is the 'going and seeing' which both balances and complements the 'sitting and thinking' (Emmet, 1991: 14).

Just how important to management research is fieldwork in general and interviewing in particular? We will argue that the importance lies not so much in the gathering of information as in other functions altogether. One of these is the need to satisfy the requirements of those who fund research. Private funding bodies generally expect fieldwork: public funding bodies generally insist. Fieldwork is evidence of contact with an important market for research, and is thus a sign that public research funds are being well spent. Such are the demands on academic resources these days that extensive empirical research cannot be undertaken without discrete funding. Thus, empirical research requires funding and funding requires empirical research.

Even when research is performed without direct funding, there is still an expectation that it will include fieldwork whenever possible. The result may be that information is sought on the cheap, a trawling process which might net something which can be used somewhere.

As one of our first research projects, we are carrying out research into the importance of company philosophy and mission as a tool of management... Can you help? Can you send us any statement that your

company has made about its purpose, objectives, values or philosophy? (Circular letter from management researchers to CEOs, 1988)

Management researchers are commonly keen to talk to the most senior people in the organization, and are commonly triumphant when they succeed. They explain that the more senior the individual, the more that individual will know about the organization. The organizational hierarchy is taken to be an information hierarchy. This empirical practice is in conflict with a great deal of experience and theory indicating that top management may not know most about what is going on in the organization, that middle management is likely to be better informed, and that junior managers may be most knowledgeable about specific matters (Johansson and Mattsson, 1988, 1992). It may be that researchers prefer interviewing senior managers because their research is more concerned with the making of decisions than with the operations of the organization. But perhaps researchers are less interested in the acquisition of information than in the acquisition of an authority for their findings which would not be bestowed by more junior managers.

Management researchers are not always explicit about whether their empirical findings emanate from very few interviews or from very many. The assumption must be that findings are sometimes based on very few (Kumar, Stern and Anderson, 1993), simply because those researchers who conduct many interviews take pains to make this quite clear.

In excess of 359 recorded interviews, conducted at all levels of the firm and sector involved over a three-year period, indicate the scale and intensity of the research. (Pettigrew and Whipp, 1991: 36)

We interviewed 236 managers in the nine companies, both at their corporate headquarters and in a number of national subsidiaries ... (Bartlett and Ghoshal, 1989: 217)

More information presents more problems in the handling of information, the very information overload senior managers seek to avoid. As interviewing is extremely resource intensive for both researcher and organization (Mintzberg, Raisinghani and Theoret, 1976), it is important to appreciate just when returns begin to diminish. Yet this is not an obvious concern of management researchers: their attitude—perhaps derived from survey methodology—seems to be that the more interviews conducted the

better the research (see Marcus, 1988; Ghoshal and Westney, 1991; Simsons, 1991).

It is from this mix of opinion and fact, of detailed descriptions and broad impressions, that we have developed our conclusions ... Our hundreds of pages of interview notes are full of stories, anecdotes and quotes. (Goold and Campbell, 1987: 7)

It is always naive to assume that the value of information is unrelated to its source, but value may also be related to the means by which information is acquired. While theoretical information gains in authority the more it has been used, the more second hand it is, just the opposite seems to hold for empirical information. Value attaches to empirical information not having been disclosed before, to its virginal status. Just why should empirical information which is second hand be considered second rate? It may be that the information is less valued for its meaning than as proof that the researcher knows the organization and therefore what he is talking about.

Despite the heavy reliance of researchers in management studies on interviews, they are not totally comfortable with the methodology (Miller and Friesen, 1977). They are happy to acknowledge all the many and very real advantages of interviewing—the realism, the detail, the immediacy of quotation, the acquisition of information unavailable from other sources, the interaction with what is being studied. They are pleased to assume that the very act of interviewing means that these advantages have been captured. They are less interested in acknowledging the constraints which interviewing imposes on their research. These extend far beyond the obvious resource costs and can entail the suppression of research.

## **CONTROL**

Where the organization being studied is also funding the research, doubts may be raised about the objectivity of the findings. But even where there is no direct funding and the organization attaches no conditions to the nature of the findings, or to the form and timing of their presentation, or to the audience to which they will be released, there may still be an expectation that nothing will be said of which the organization would disapprove. Implicit expectation, because it is boundless, can be more inhibiting than explicit

restriction. Good research practice is to define precisely what control the organization will have over results before the empirical work begins. These agreements are redolent with a tacit 'no surprises' understanding, the product of a situation in which neither side can know in advance precisely what results the research will produce. They cannot, however, be dynamic and much may change in the organization during the years between the beginning of empirical work and academic publication.

All empirical research gives the organization under investigation influence over the results of the research. When an organization completes a survey form or decides which documents should be made available, it can obviously control its input to research. But controlling what individuals say is not as easy. Consequently, the organization may insist on scrutinizing output. Sometimes the researcher may find this a helpful exercise: sometimes less helpful. The interview may open up the organization for the inspection of researchers, but—much more than any other form of fieldwork—it condemns their findings to being laid bare for the dissection of the organization. Objections to the revelation of even minor details can often preclude the use of more significant information, and can undermine major arguments. In consequence, the researcher has some considerable incentive to avoid detail, or at least to avoid making any substantial use of it.

The factual information given by [the author] about [the company] has no obvious errors. I have not had the chance to check the accuracy of the scores of references ... [The author] expresses a number of unsubstantiated and potentially damaging opinions ... [The author] liberally laces the document with quotations, many of which are injurious, many of which are unattributed. A continually damaging theme is thereby built, without enabling the reader to judge the reliability of that theme. (Comment from senior manager on draft paper, 1993)

## ACCESS

Interviewing requires access to the organization being studied. Even where the organization is not funding the research directly, it is contributing resources in terms of expensive managerial time, and access may not be granted lightly. In practice, the need for access may make the researcher more subject to organizational constraints than any direct funding. It is possible, of course, to talk to a few individuals within the organization without official

sanction: it is not possible to interview large numbers of senior managers without the organization's formal approval. A research project with such an interviewing base must be a research project deemed important by organizational criteria.

Most management researchers who interview in organizations crave access to the executive suite. Only a few gain entrance (Greiner, 1985: 251). How do they achieve this? Pettigrew describes the process as networking, insinuation into an organization so that access to one individual leads on to access to another.

... in Britain the game that's played is essentially a networking game. They allow access in a small node or corner of the network, and then you get tested out on that node. And if you are deemed acceptable on whatever criteria, then you pass on to the next part of the node and then the next part. (Pettigrew, 1985: 264)

What, though, are the criteria by which acceptability is judged? It is conceivable, though only just, that the researcher may gain acceptability through impressing senior managers with radical, heretical views. It may be rather easier to gain acceptability by adaptation to the values of managers, by sharing their views of reality (Hultman and Klasson, 1994).

## **THE HOSTAGE SYNDROME**

If hostages, no matter how badly they are treated, begin to identify with their captors, it is hardly surprising that the empirical researcher may begin to identify with the organization being studied. The organization's interests become the researcher's interests. Researchers who interview, because they are thrust into personal contact with managers, would seem to be especially susceptible to the syndrome. The risks are increased because most academics have never been in anything but the most minor of management positions: interviewing puts them into direct contact with those responsible for decisions which affect thousands, with those who allocate vast resources, with those who are powerful in another world altogether and who exercise skills utterly different from their own. Moreover, unlike the academic, who has only title and reputation, senior managers are surrounded by all the structure and trappings of power. Nearly always, these are the surroundings in which interviews take place, and in which objectivity can easily turn to deference, impartiality to common cause. It is interesting to

speculate whether the information garnered from interviews, and the questions asked for that matter, would be very different were interviews conducted in universities or on neutral ground. We might also speculate to what extent the cult of chief executives as organizational heroes is associated with experiencing them holding court in full regalia (see Hellgren, Melin and Pettersson, 1993). Would academic promotion of the cult be quite as strong were chief executives interviewed while washing dishes?

Moreover, just as the fate of hostages is in the hands of their captors, so academics may well calculate that their fortunes are determined by senior managers. They must satisfy powerful people in order to ensure continued access. The more interviews the researcher completes, the greater the investment and the greater the dependence on the organization for permission to continue the research. We have already considered the relationship between the satisfaction of powerful people in the organization and gaining access to other powerful people, but on this same satisfaction also depend access to other organizations, and—to some, often considerable, extent—offers of consultancy work, appointments to advisory positions, prospects of further funding, hopes of academic advancement—even continued employment. All these considerations are, of course, quite irrelevant to the immediate purpose of the interview, and would certainly be beyond the purview of any text on empirical research, but it is not inconceivable that they may influence the manner in which the interview is conducted. It is just possible that they may also influence research findings.

We have co-operated with you in the past in what we believe has been a constructive relationship but this latest paper is both inaccurate and wholly unacceptable and will undoubtedly destroy that relationship ... (Comments of senior manager on draft paper, 1994)

## **CULTURAL CHASM**

Fieldwork places the researcher within the environment of the organization. Much can be learned simply by walking into a factory, without necessarily talking to anybody. Interviewing is much more intimate. The more involved academics become in the environment of the organization they are studying, the greater the risk of being enveloped by it. Business culture is radically different from academic culture. The former is fundamentally hierarchical and



tightly structured, especially in large organizations: the latter—at least traditionally—is just about the opposite and especially in research, where the findings of the famous may be publicly challenged by the unknown. For the academic researcher, peer review and membership of a community of scholars are important. Senior managers have long found difficulty appreciating this importance.

They tell me you academics write two or three papers a year. How many thousand words is that? I must write that much in a week. (Interview with senior manager, 1976)

Researchers may find themselves forced to defend their values, to preserve their culture, in a hostile environment. This can be difficult: it is hard to question closely a manager who normally would not tolerate being questioned at all. It is much easier simply to accept what is said, to accede to the culture of the organization. It is easier still, and much more conducive to reaping the benefits which flow from the satisfaction of those interviewed, to ask the questions managers wish to answer, and to ask them in ways managers will find immediately acceptable. Thus, for example, a question about the role the manager has played in corporate success is much more acceptable than a question about the manager's role in corporate failure. In management studies, there is strangely little research on failure which is supported by fieldwork (see Major and Zucker, 1989), yet there is probably much more to be learnt from failure than from success.

Because managers are unfamiliar with academic culture, and find what they do recognize is sometimes inimical to their own, problems can arise in using information gained from interviews. Managers may not be sympathetic to the demands of academic rigor; for example, the need to check what they say against information from other sources. Managers may be unsympathetic towards the interpretation needed when accounts are at variance, towards integration with information they have not supplied, and towards aggregation which diminishes the prominence of their own views. Good research practice demands that those who are interviewed approve the use of their information in the context in which the researcher has placed it. The difficulties many managers experience distinguishing between confirming their meaning and accepting organizational responsibility for its application result in this convention not always being observed. Even complying with agreements to ensure that information published is accurate

and not confidential can pose problems. Individual managers do not relish this responsibility and there is no obvious institutional office to accept it. That part of the organization dealing with public relations may well be left to handle the task—with predictable results.

You asked various of my colleagues to comment on your draft... Some confusion has arisen because it is our normal—and preferred—practice to have drafts of this kind sent to the Department of Public Affairs... (Letter from Director of Public Affairs, 1994)

The first paragraph of page 20, which may be an accurate quotation, is not something we would wish to have included within a published document. (Letter from Director of Human Resources, 1994)

The latter observation seems quite unexceptional, but in this case the objection was to a quotation from a manager in another company altogether. Similarly, one Swedish company demanded not only that its managers' answers be changed in the draft paper it was sent, but also that the questions be altered (Melin, 1977). From the perspective of the company's Public Affairs Department, publication about the company should be publication which makes a favorable impression on the public.

There was a time when managers were less guarded than they are now over what they said to academics and what academics made of it. That was when virtually the only outlet for academic publication was academic journals, largely unread by managers themselves. But the same pressures which have forced academic research to become more obviously useful (and more empirical) have also encouraged academics to disseminate their findings more widely, especially through the media. What is said about the firm in the media concerns managers greatly, and much effort is made to discourage the publication of information which may have an adverse effect on share prices. The point is a small one, but it encapsulates nicely many of the problems of the interview as a means of acquiring information. It is incontrovertible that the interview can provide invaluable information about the organization, but the greater the attempts to exploit this wealth of information, the greater the difficulties encountered (Miles, 1979). In practice, there is every incentive for researchers to claim that their research has benefited from information from interviews, while avoiding the problems which arise from using this information.

We are told that over 400 people were interviewed to secure a variety of perspectives; few make their appearances in these pages and we learn little directly of what they had to say. (Mangham, 1993)

## AGGREGATION AND INTEGRATION OF INFORMATION

Interviews yield so much and such diverse information that even simple aggregation presents problems. Contradictory information is often the rule rather than the exception. Consider the problems posed by a single sentence from one senior manager, interspersed with comments (in italics) from other senior managers in the same organization.

...the non-executive directors recognized that there was the need for another leader to come and cause change to happen in [the company], *[That's why he was brought in; he was brought in by the non-executive directors of [the company] to make a radical change, but this is definitely not for attribution.]*

and one of the great things that [the new CEO] has brought to [the company] is not only the creation of the mission statement,

*[Our strategy mission statement here is motherhood.]*

but the rigidity with which we have applied it to our businesses since.

*[Does there have to be synergy? ... I know that the main board have often thought of becoming a holding company. ... I mean that might bring into question then [the CEO's] quest for [the sort of] company that since I have known him he has started to say less about looking for. He has just expressed frustration that it didn't happen.]*

(Interviews with senior managers, 1992)

The survey approach ('77% of managers think that...') overcomes these difficulties, but at the unacceptable cost of masking the variety and individuality of interpretation which interviews reveal. Conveying these elements is never easy. Sometimes managers will insist that the most interesting information not be used.

I think at the present time it's the Minister that opposes it. As I understand (and I hope you fillet out this part), he is extremely paranoid about it. (Interview with senior manager, 1990)

Sometimes the most important arguments are expressed with an emotion that is difficult to capture in the prose of academic publication, and which is quite unsuitable for quotation.

[The parent company] can go to bloody hell. They make zilch contribution here... I look upon [the parent company] as a bank. It provides no more than finance. (Interview with senior manager, 1992)

Managerially and in social terms, [the manager] was a buffoon. He's got no political savvy at all, and has behaved in a way which is frequently very insensitive to the rest of his colleagues. (Interview with senior manager, 1991)

I'm fascinated by someone who is so incompetent, as far as I can see, in understanding any kind of management theory, and doesn't seem to have any insight into where this business is going, but can nevertheless manage to make money in private industry. If anything has convinced me that it must be a bloody pushover out there, it's watching [the manager] in action. (Interview with senior manager, 1991)

Empirical work—and especially interviewing—is guaranteed to provide a mass of detail, but the insight required to make good use of this detail must come from the academic. In practice, the academic encounters real incentives to deny the complexity of reality which interviews can expose.

It is a collection of thoughts and public statements made by executives in various firms ... I do not see a systematic thought emerging from this collection of statements (which is considered as empirical evidence by the authors—I don't think that is a correct claim). (Referee's comment on paper based on interviews, 1995)

I still have doubts about the included quotes. Can we learn anything from such anecdotes? How do we know that these quotes are representative or were merely selected to fit the points that the author wants to make? (Referee's comment on paper based on interviews, 1996)

The interview is far from being the only means available to the empirical researcher of gaining information about the organization. Much information may be in the public domain and may be obtained without the consent of the organization. For instance, there are the organization's own publications, unpublished archives in public collections, articles in the media, academic publications directly concerned with the organization, publications from other organizations, and a whole host of peripheral publications (see Chen, Farh and Macmillan, 1993). However, the researcher encounters major problems integrating information gained from interviews with other information about the organization. Among these is the problem of reconciling the manager's view of reality with other views, particularly those from outside the organization.

It is not that academics are unaware that views of reality will differ; almost the opposite in fact (Myrdal, 1970). Managers, and the organization as a whole, are simply less appreciative of views from outside the organization which are in conflict with their own. The problem becomes acute when the mixing of public information with that from interviews reveals more—often much more—than managers intended. Because the mix may not satisfy the organization, the academic may well be faced with a very practical choice of

using either interview information or other information, but not both. For example, the use of public information, properly cited, will generally reveal the identity of a company promised anonymity by the researcher. Because of the huge resource investment in interviews, the researcher may prefer to sacrifice other information in preference to interview material. Consider the following information which, because it was given in confidence, severely restricted the use that could be made of public information about the event.

In a nutshell, there was a cabal, almost a secret society within [the subsidiary] of a few individuals—not that many. We were trying to collect debts, we were sending in the heavies, sending in the heavies to take back [property] in lieu of debt, all that type of thing. I'm not too sure whether money was actually being laundered. Certain of the individuals are going to be, and are being, prosecuted ... [The responsible director] did not know what was going on at all. (Interview with senior manager, 1994)

Interviews confront the academic with a variety of managerial views which must be integrated into an argument. The academic is hard pressed to handle in a similar way the much greater variety of views available in the outside world. Consequently, there is a temptation to simplify these external views, to unify so that the focus of attention remains on the empirical information unearthed. Resources being finite, and interviews exceedingly resource consuming, there may be few to spare to treat external views as exhaustively as internal. So, researchers may find themselves prisoner of their own methodology, condemned to look inwards, deprived of the context external views of reality provide (see Mangham, 1993).

No academic study can rely entirely on empirical information alone, no matter how rich the information. Empirical information must also be integrated with theory and this is often no easy task (see Flanders, 1965: 9). It is particularly hard to integrate interview information with theory. Unless they are unacceptably led by the interviewer, managers cannot be expected to provide their information in a form which is compatible with theory. This, of course, is where the researcher's skill should be brought into play, but the skills required to extract information are not necessarily the skills required for integration. There may be evidence of this in the tendency of academic publications in management studies for empirical information to be presented quite separately from theoretical information. This makes starkly evident that fieldwork has been done while minimizing the problems of integration.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The dogma of the times, particularly in the UK, is that academic research must be useful (Department of Trade and Industry, 1993; ESRC, 1996). It is hard to quarrel with this, but useful to whom? Little academic research can even aspire to be useful to everybody, and none can be equally useful. So, academic research is expected to find its market. For management studies, this is seen to be organizations themselves, those who make policy which will affect these organizations, and others who study them. Of the three, organizations themselves are reckoned the most important market by far, the reasoning being that their use of research not only satisfies one market, but also validates the research for the other two markets. A crude legitimation process has been set in place.

In management studies, academic research is good academic research if it demonstrates the characteristics of a private good. Such research is easier—much easier—to assess than research which is primarily a public good. The user can express satisfaction, most tangibly by funding such research or by supporting its public funding. There is no equivalent means by which the general public, a whole economy or whole society can express its approval of research. Thus it is that less and less research is produced as a public good, and more and more research is directed towards satisfying the immediate demands of specific users. The researcher becomes more accountable to these specific users than to the vague purpose of contributing to knowledge. Consequently, there is every incentive for the researcher to undertake the sort of research which the organization judges to be appropriate to its interests. Equally, there is every incentive to adopt a methodology which demonstrates how central to the research are the views of the organization's managers. Fieldwork in general, and the interview in particular, have thus become increasingly important components of research in management studies.

There are major obstacles to reform, which certainly include those who provide the resources for research. But perhaps the greatest obstacle of all is the academic community itself. It has been eager to seize the advantages which fieldwork and interviewing offer research, and reluctant to acknowledge the disadvantages. The academic community has guarded its investment in this particular methodology, presenting it as a means not just of procuring more, deeper and richer information, but of involving users in

research, of demonstrating to users themselves, research funders, and the world at large just how useful academic research really is. For the researcher as much as for the archetypal American tourist, being there is less important than being able to say you have been there.

Unless major effort is made to overcome the obstacles presented by fieldwork and interviewing, they will continue to erode the quality—and actually the usefulness—of much academic research. What is required is not simply refinement of interviewing techniques; there are already texts aplenty on how to ask questions. It is recognition that much interviewing is carried out primarily to demonstrate involvement with users rather than for the information they may provide. Further recognition is required that interviewing for information demands vast resources to procure the information, and especially to use it. Further still, it should be recognized that the very methodology of interviewing for information exposes the researcher to pressures in both the acquisition and use of information. The researcher has every incentive to yield to these pressures to make the research task easier, and to please those interviewed—the users academic research must satisfy. Quite simply, this is suppression of research by methodology. The purpose of this paper is to encourage this recognition. Without it, the puzzling conclusion to the report of the ESRC's inquiry into the quality of management research may be meaningful after all.

Research can and does contribute to today's problems, but it has a greater contribution to make: it should also contribute to tomorrow's problems. (Commission on Management Research, 1994: 27)

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