

Reflexivity in Management Research*

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ABSTRACT Recently the term reflexivity has entered management discourses about research, education and practice. This paper highlights the ambiguity which prevails concerning the concept of reflexivity showing how the ways in which reflexivity itself is constituted inevitably articulates epistemological circularity in that commentators' definitions and prescriptions vary according to their tacit metatheoretical commitments. Hence the aim of this paper is to explore this paradox by excavating such commitments and demonstrating how they constitute particular forms of reflexivity – each with distinctive implications for the role of the management researcher in terms of aims, processes, and outcomes. Three generic forms of reflexivity are proposed: the methodological, the hyper or deconstructive, and the epistemic.

INTRODUCTION

According to Karl Weick (1999), it is only in the past 20 years or so that there has been discussion of the notion that in order to understand ourselves as management researchers we must engage with ourselves through thinking about our own thinking. Although there are numerous aspects to this 'reflexive turn' (Weick, 1999) management scholars have usually emphasized how it entails noticing, evaluating and being suspicious of the relationship between the researcher and the 'objects' of research. This has lead some to scrutinize how potentially diverse yet usually unacknowledged pre-understandings influence how we undertake management research and thereby impact upon the claims advanced by its results (e.g. Alvesson and Deetz, 2000; Chia, 1995; Easterby-Smith and Malina, 1999; Gergen and Gergen, 1991; Hassard, 1993; Holland, 1990; Linstead, 1993, 1994; Newton, 1999; Palmer and Dunford, 1996; Watson, 1995).

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Pivotal to inspiring this 'new sensibility' (Willmott, 1998) was Burrell and Morgan's (1979) foregrounding of the role played by metatheoretical assumptions in the constitution of organizational analysis which served to heighten our sensitivity to the choices that were being made, usually by default (see Deetz, 1996; Jaques, 1992). Subsequently, Burrell and Morgan's analysis was applied to a variety of management disciplines including accounting (Chua, 1986; Hopper and Powell, 1985); marketing (Arndt, 1985); information systems (Hirschheim, 1985; Hirschheim and Klein, 1989); personnel and human resource management (Gowler and Legge, 1986; Kamoche, 1991); and organizational change (Collins, 1998). Simultaneously Morgan attempted to popularize metatheoretical thinking within both academic (1980, 1983a, 1983b, 1986, 1996) and practitioner audiences (1993, 1998) by encouraging, as a developmental tool, reflexive examination of the metaphorical tropes which organize organizational analysis. Clearly the aim here was to engender 'reflexive' (Senge, 1990) or 'reflective' practice where management practitioners 'surface and question their intuitive understandings . . . undertake on-the-spot experiments . . . [and] . . . engage in reflective conversations with their situation' (Schon, 1983, p. 265).

However a key idea also put forcefully by much of this work is that to make unexamined metatheoretical commitments, and remain unaware of their origins, amounts to an abdication of intellectual responsibility which results in poor research practices. Even a cursory examination of the philosophy of science would confirm that while such commitments are unavoidable and lead us to engage with 'management' in particular ways, they are also always contentious and precarious and thus require vigilance. According to Chia and Morgan, vigilance must also embrace management education through the inculcation of 'an intimate understanding of the way . . . management knowledge . . . is organized, produced and legitimized' (1996, p. 58) – an agenda which has become all the more important with the 'managerialization of the world' (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000, p. 209).

So while we cannot eradicate our subjective metatheoretical commitments, we must open them to our inspection through our capacity for reflexivity (Bourdieu, 1984, 1990; Sandywell, 1996; Steier, 1991). These developments are seen to be so important by some scholars that one recently claimed that such reflexivity is an inalienable 'human capacity which defines our existence' (Holland, 1999, p. 482) while others have claimed that it is a 'fundamental dimension' of epistemology (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 68). However, in placing such reflexive demands upon any management researcher, educationalist or practitioner an epistemological and ontological conundrum occurs, for

. . . we are like sailors who on the open sea must reconstruct their ship but are never able to start afresh from the bottom . . . They make use of some drifting timber of the old structure, to modify the skeleton and the hull of their vessel. But they cannot put into dock in order to start from scratch. During their work

they stay on the old structure and deal with heavy gales and thundering waves.
(Neurath, 1944, p. 47)

Here Neurath was using a nautical metaphor to show how the possibility of coming to a foundational set of standards, whose insights allow us to appraise all other disciplines, must remain a forlorn hope due to the inevitable circularity of epistemological and ontological issues: that any theory of knowledge presupposes knowledge of the conditions in which knowledge takes place. This circularity means that we cannot detach ourselves from our metatheoretical commitments so as to reflexively assess those commitments – indeed we would depend upon them in order to undertake that task. Ironically, it follows that if there are no secure foundations from which we can begin any consideration of our knowledge of our knowledge, then how reflexivity itself is constituted in management research also expresses, and varies according to, the reflexive scholar's own epistemological and ontological commitments.

For instance the use of the term of reflexivity often seems to embrace the ontological and epistemological commitment that it is possible for the researcher to autonomously and *rationaly* scrutinize the 'relationship between the researcher and the object of research ... [as] ... part of the empirical evidence for (or against) the claims advanced' (Harding, 1987, p. 9). In contrast Linstead (1994) doubts whether reflexivity can take the form of such self-knowledge located in purging the biases and worldviews of researchers from their research. Indeed even foregrounding 'the researcher in research' (Linstead, 1994, p. 1325) is tenuous since it is unlikely that researchers can access and understand their constitutive assumptions which are 'struggling and emerging and hence being realized from day to day' (p. 1326). Instead Linstead's own postmodern ontological and epistemological commitments seem to lead him (e.g. 1993) to advocate an alternative form of reflexivity located in an unending spiral of deconstructive unsettling where there can be no 'fixed' truth nor 'final' outcome.

Given this complexity and the terminological ambiguity which can result, the aims of this paper are to explore this circularity by tracing how reflexivity is a variable outcome of our knowledge constituting assumptions about ontology and epistemology. We are particularly concerned with the consequences of this for management research and will examine the implications for the role of the management researcher in terms of the varying aims, processes and outcomes of each mode of reflexivity identified.

CONSTITUTING REFLEXIVITY IN MANAGEMENT RESEARCH

One way of understanding the various approaches to undertaking management research and their interrelationships is illustrated by Figure 1. Here three possible approaches to reflexivity are constituted by different sets of *assumptions* about epis-

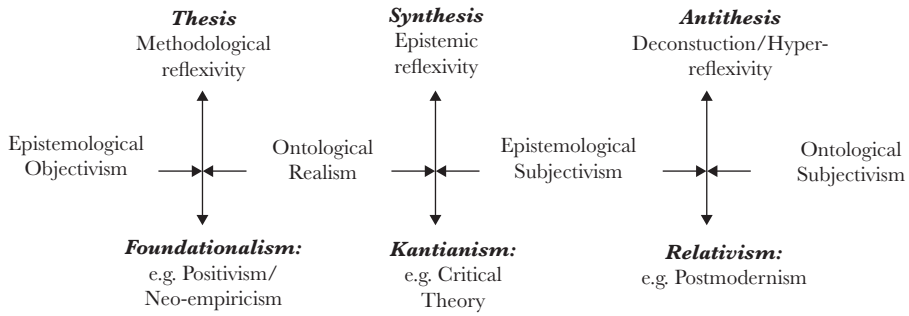


Figure 1. Constituting reflexivity in management research

temology and ontology. Firstly, an objectivist view of epistemology presupposes the possibility of a theory neutral observational language (Hindess, 1977) where our sensory experience of the objects of reality provides the only secure foundation for social scientific knowledge (e.g. Ayer, 1971). Located in a Cartesian dualism, observers can ‘picture’ (Wittgenstein, 1922) the external world objectively and thereby deductively test, or inductively generate, theory. Thus truth, as correspondence, is to be found in the observer’s passive registration of the facts that constitute reality. In contrast, a subjectivist view of epistemology repudiates the possibility of a theory neutral observational language (e.g. Berger and Luckmann, 1967; Burr, 1995). Far from language allowing access to and representation of reality, language either creates reality (see Rorty, 1979, 1982) or versions of a reality ‘still unknown and despised’ (Latour, 1988, p. 173). Foundationalism is dismissed since science cannot articulate universal truths and any account will be a local social construction created through the operation of language games (Wittgenstein, 1958), or discourses (Foucault, 1977), or interests (Habermas, 1972), or traditions (Gadamer, 1975), or world views (Geertz, 1989) and so on.

Meanwhile a realist view of ontology^[1] assumes that social and natural reality has an independent existence prior to human cognition whereas a subjectivist ontology assumes that what we take to be reality is an output of human cognitive processes. As is shown in Figure 1, an objectivist epistemology is necessarily dependent on realist ontological assumptions – to say that one can have an objective view of a reality which doesn’t exist independent of the act of cognition would seem incoherent. On the other hand, as some philosophers have observed (e.g. Bhaskar, 1978; Margolis, 1986; Putnam, 1981), a subjectivist epistemology can be combined with either a subjectivist or a realist ontology. The former combination forms a postmodern position where reality becomes a self-referential outcome of discursive practices; the latter is a Kantian position which differentiates between phenomenal ‘thought objects’ and noumenal ‘real objects’ by suggesting that there is an external reality, independent of, yet resistant to, human activity (Kant, 1781). External reality is a ‘thing in itself’ which remains unknowable. As Kolakowski

argues such ‘things in themselves’ do not have conceptual counterparts, rather our objects of knowledge – ‘things for us’ – are constituted by ‘. . . active contact with the resistance of nature . . . [that] . . . creates knowing man and nature at one and the same time [sic]’ (1969, p. 75). In this manner external reality imposes pragmatic limits upon what postmodernists assume to be a free-play of signifiers – a position summarized by Parker’s observation that

. . . unlike postmodernists I believe that that there are limits to human action . . . I do not believe that the world is infinitely pliable and would want to assert that physical, biological and social constraints exist in a real sense . . . Language may be the medium for all forms of inquiry . . . but it does not follow from that premise that language is all there is . . . (1993, pp. 207–8)

For instance, as in critical theory, the result is a position that represents a synthesis that negates and transcends both positivism’s foundationalist thesis and postmodernism’s antithesis. To paraphrase Bernstein (1983, p. 18), by fighting a war on two fronts such a synthesis transcends what Descartes construed as an ineluctable either/or dichotomy: either foundationalism or relativism (see also Bhaskar, 1986, pp. 72–5). Below we shall explore how these three positions impact upon the constitution of reflexivity in management research.

THESIS: REALIST ONTOLOGY – OBJECTIVIST EPISTEMOLOGY

Here two approaches to management research are evident: positivism and neo-empiricism.^[2] Both share the empiricist commitment that our sensory experience provides the only secure foundation for management research. Where they part company is over what they understand to be observable as opposed to metaphysical (see Lessnoff, 1974). Unlike the positivists, neo-empiricists argue that in order to understand human behaviour in organizations we must access their cultures through *verstehen* and the deployment of reputedly qualitative methods of data collection (e.g. Symon and Cassell, 1998). So as to legitimate this interpretive methodological imperative neo-empiricists implicitly question the methodological unity of the sciences, grounded in *erklären*, as proposed by positivists. Positivists have reciprocated by denying both the possibility and desirability of *verstehen* thereby restoring the methodological unity of natural and social sciences (e.g. Abel, 1958).

Although their idiom varies, a number of commentators agree (see Alvesson and Deetz, 2000; Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000; Hammersley, 1992; Knights, 1992; Putnam et al., 1993; Van Maanen, 1995) that neo-empiricists still retain what many philosophers define as positivism’s key epistemic characteristic – the presupposition of a theory neutral observational language. In positivism this act of passive registration would be construed as a subject-object dualism – a differentiation of the knower-researcher from the known-observed. In neo-empiricism

this passivity would be articulated as a subject-subject dualism – a differentiation of the knower-researcher from his/her descriptions of other actors' cultural experience.

Because each of the dualisms noted above rest on a putative epistemic objectivity, which privileges the consciousness of the management researcher as capable of discovering the 'truth' about the world in a correspondence sense, the reflexivity which is deployed is limited to what we shall call *methodological* reflexivity: a localized critique and evaluation of the 'technical' aspects of the particular methodology deployed rather than the underlying metatheoretical assumptions that justify that methodology in the first place. Here reflexivity constitutes a research tool, whose deployment helps the management researcher to nurture and sustain objective inquiry (Mulkay, 1992). Analogously, the management researcher therefore operates

. . . like the chess player who, with a problem stated and the board physically or mentally before him, tries out various alternative moves in the search for a solution. These trial attempts, whether by the chess player or the scientist, are trials only of themselves, not the rules of the game. (Kuhn, 1970, p. 37)

For instance, in undertaking *verstehen*, neo-empiricist organizational ethnographers may be 'internally reflexive' by critically scrutinizing the impact upon the research setting and findings of the researcher and his/her research strategy (Hammersley, 1992, p. 64). This might include the effects of the various field roles (Gold, 1958) adopted during data collection so as to ensure a 'necessary' balance: between 'outsider' and 'insider' (Horowitz, 1986); between 'distance' and 'inclusion' (Pollner and Emerson, 1983); between 'detachment' and 'involvement' (Shalin, 1986). A key aim here is to facilitate access to uncensored organizational 'backstages' (Goffman, 1969), or 'theories-in-use' (Argyris et al., 1985), and the multiple perspectives that abound (Pettigrew, 1985) while avoiding 'overrapport' with members by retaining 'social and intellectual distance' and 'analytical space' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p. 115). Indeed through 'confessional tales' that reveal aspects of themselves and the research process the ethnographer persuades the reader that he/she 'can rely on the writer's hard won objectivity' (Seale, 1999, p. 161). So according to Markus (1994) the underlying metatheoretical commitment here is to an everyday world of intersubjectively constituted facts which ethnographers can objectively access provided that the ethnographer's inquiries are sufficiently robust: an aim more likely when methodological reflexivity is deployed.

Where the commitment is to *erklären*, the overriding aim is to gain access to the causal relations that are embedded in an *a priori*, cognitively accessible reality by methodologically creating, or simulating, conditions of closure which allow empirical testing (e.g. Davis, 1985; Donaldson, 1996, 1997). So for the experimenter, key reflexive concerns include: ensuring that every respondent had expe-

rienced the same experimental treatment within an experimental group; measuring variation in the dependent variable; matching control and experimental groups so as to rule out the influence of extraneous variables, as far as is possible in the quasi-experimental conditions which usually apply in management research (Cook and Campbell, 1979; Orpen, 1979). Alternatively, whether their aim is causal explanation or population description, survey researchers must reflexively evaluate the adequacy of the operationalization processes through which they have translated the abstract concepts, they need to measure and statistically analyse, into a valid and reliable sets of standardized indicators articulated in questionnaires administered to representative samples (Reeves and Harper, 1981; Schoenfeldt, 1984; Schriesheim et al., 1993).

Overall the focus of reflexivity, in either *erklären* or *verstehen*, is the monitoring by the researcher of his/her behavioural impact upon the social settings under investigation created by the deployment of particular research protocols and associated field roles so as to eradicate methodological lapses. So it would seem that Habermas (1972, p. 67) was largely correct when he claimed that objectivist epistemological assumptions served to immunize adherents from epistemological self-reflection. Provided that the researcher can rigorously deploy well established 'scientific' methodologies, he/she will be able to passively accumulate facts from an ontologically prior world so as to objectively test or ground theory. Such assumptions render the researcher's own involvement in the research process, beyond ostensibly technical methodological issues, unproblematic. For some critics such technicism and scientism effectively foreclose debate about the ethical dimension to management (e.g. Alvesson and Willmott, 1996; Grey and Mitev, 1995) and engender a passive consumption of expert management research outcomes by organizational audiences (Calas and Smircich, 1988). In the case of neo-empiricists, another effect of such closure is that what they have learned about human behaviour in organizations or elsewhere – that it is interpretive and based upon members' social construction – is not recursively applied to their own working (see Clough, 1992; Van Maanen, 1995; Wacquant, 1992). It is precisely such recursive application which is embedded in the postmodern antithesis where the ideal of a passive and neutral observer is replaced by an image of activity and positioning.

ANTITHESIS: ONTOLOGICAL SUBJECTIVISM – EPISTEMOLOGICAL SUBJECTIVISM

Pivotal to postmodernism's antithetical repudiation of the positivist's objectivist epistemological and realist ontological commitments is the postmodern linguistic turn: where language is never innocent; where no meaning exists beyond language; where knowledge and truth are linguistic entities constantly open to revision; where the 'social bond is linguistic but it is not woven with a single thread' (Lyotard, 1984,

p. 40). An outcome of the linguistic turn has to be the repudiation of any separation of subject and object (see Chia, 1995; Jeffcutt, 1994; Kilduff and Mehra, 1997); indeed our linguistic schemes are thought to *create* reality. For instance, Baudrillard (1983) claims that all that we are left with are 'simulacra' – images which refer to nothing but themselves: a 'hyper-reality', divorced from extra-linguistic reference points, in which there is nothing to see save simulations which appear to be real. So through what has been called 'the twilight of the real' (Wakefield, 1990) or 'reality's erasure' (Gergen, 1992) the epistemological fulcrum provided by a commitment to reality as an independently existing reference point is thereby destroyed since 'the world is not already there, waiting for us to reflect it' (Cooper and Burrell, 1988, p. 100).

From the orientation provided by this subjectivist antithesis Lyotard (1984, 1988) sees knowledge as being produced by particular language games which, via their own rules and structures, produce a plurality of localized and incommensurable understandings which offer no epistemological basis for preferring one manifestation over alternatives. Truth, or reality, becomes a socio-linguistic artefact where justification lies in the discursive hegemony culturally-specific to a 'form' of life. Postmodernists eschew any prescription for organizational change beyond 'the search for instabilities' (Lyotard, 1984, p. 54) which unsettle established discourses (Barry, 1997) and express 'tolerance of a range of meanings without advocating any of them' (Rosenau, 1992, p. 139). In effect truth, whether in terms of rationally grounded consensus or of correspondence to an independent reality, is no longer considered to be a worthwhile goal for management research or a possible moral basis for managerial practice and authority.

If language rhetorically produces as many realities as there are modes of describing and explaining, a postmodern reflexivity must repudiate the empiricist's technical fixes by displaying and unsettling discursive 'rules of the game' as well as comparing incommensurable language games so as to highlight their contradictions and conflicts. For Gergen (1992) this means that there are always deferred or marginalized meanings within any communication which can be revealed by a reader through deconstruction: the dismantling of linguistic constructions so as to reveal their inherent contradictions, assumptions and different layers of meaning, which are hidden from the naive reader and unrecognized by the author as they strive to maintain unity and consistency (see also Czarniawaska-Joerges, 1996; Kilduff, 1993). For Derrida such deconstruction entails 'play . . . the disruption of presence . . . Play is always the play of absence and presence, but if it is to be thought radically, play must be conceived of before the alternative of presence and absence' (1978, p. 292). Therefore deconstruction must 'resuscitate the subordinate terms, to elevate them, to amplify the silent voices in order to problematize the dominant understanding and rather than create a new hierarchy, re-construct a duality of awareness within conventional consciousness' (Linstead, 1993, p. 69). In a similar vein Cooper (1989) observes that deconstruction involves two move-

ments: overturning, where terms are shown to suppress their binary opposites; and metaphorization which involves recognition that positively and negatively valued terms are defined in relation to each other and inhabit each other. Nevertheless this binary opposite is devalued, excluded and suppressed in the text – a hierarchy which deconstruction overturns by ‘centring the marginal and marginalizing the central’ (Linstead, 1993, p. 58).

Hence postmodernists deny that any text can ever be settled or stable: it can always be reflexively questioned as layers of meaning are removed to reveal those meanings which have been suppressed. So in organizational life, meaning is always precarious and local (Linstead and Grafton-Small, 1992) and any construct may be deconstructed even, as Cooper (1990) shows, the notion of organization itself. Simultaneously deconstruction leads to questions about *how* something becomes seen as factual and about the consequences of such privileging (Du Gay, 1996). Usually we remain blithely unaware of these socio-linguistic processes as we construct our objects of perception. Thus in Chia’s (1995) terms, postmodern deconstruction is about remembering those formative processes that attribute a false concreteness to our objects of analysis which positivists have sublimated or forgotten.

The result is a relativistic position for deconstruction does not get the deconstructor closer to a ‘fixed’, or privileged, truth. Every text expresses a hidden narrative logic concerning discursive authority, gender, power and knowledge (Clough, 1992, p. 5) which deconstruction (re)presents for reflexive analysis – whether this be corporate strategy (Barry and Elmes, 1997; Knights, 1992; Knights and Morgan, 1991), or HRM (Townley, 1994), or work psychology (Hollway, 1991) and so on. But at most, deconstruction can only invoke alternative social constructions of reality within a text which itself is amenable to further interrogation so as to expose its underlying narrative logic. Indeed the resultant unsettling is pivotal since it avoids the authorial privileging upon which discursive closure depends. So, for instance, Foucault de-centres the notion of the ‘author’ as an outcome of ‘the privileged moment of individualization in the history of ideas, knowledge, literature, philosophy and the sciences’ (1984, p. 101). The implication is that management researchers must reflexively deconstruct their own representational practices.

However where can this process end? Surely relativism must mean that such reflexivity must be an endless autopoietic process where postmodernists continuously deconstruct their own deconstructions of themselves within a recursively closed cognitive system. For example Ashmore (1989), Ashmore et al. (1995) and Woolgar (1988a, 1988b) advocate the use of what they call ‘hyper-reflexivity’, the ‘deconstruction of deconstruction’ and the development of ‘new literary forms’ which repudiate any claim to textual authority. Released ‘from the constraints of representational realism’ (Ashmore, 1989, p. xxix) their project abandons the conventional mode of writing exemplified by the textual autonomy invoked by the

authoritative monologue of a single official writer. Instead a number of voices appear, disappear and reappear throughout the self-referential text interrupting and disrupting each other where any 'author' is debated by 'meta-authors' who in turn are debated by their own 'meta-authors', and so on, in a potentially endless spiral of introspective reflexive iterations which surface the multiple discourses immanent in any social space thereby avoiding discursive closure.

A practical effect may be that 'the problems of (fictional) individuals in (mythical) organizations are safely placed behind philosophical double glazing and their cries are treated as interesting examples of discourse' (Parker, 1992, p. 11). Any intervention, organizational or otherwise, implies the exercise of choice based upon some kind of evaluative criteria. But as Newton observes the problem for a postmodernist would be 'in determining that basis, since this implies the end of endless reflexivity and a move towards the postmodernity abhorrent notion of closure' (1996, p. 15). So on the one hand postmodernism could promote the aesthetic disinterestedness and emotional detachment of Bauman's *flaneur* (1995). On the other hand this fear of discursive closure has not prevented some management scholars from considering how a postmodern stance may be used to inform organizational interventions and change. For instance Barry (1997) outlines how 'narrative therapy' eschews expert-imposed solutions; and through careful reading, acknowledgement and reflection of client stories opens space for the authoring of alternative stories which counter hegemonic discourses so that there is no longer a sole dominating account of the problem. Hence Barry implies that discursive closure may not be the outcome of intervention, indeed intervention may reopen discursive opportunities so that 'if organization members can better understand how they construct themselves and their organization, they will be better able to address their problems' (Barry, 1997, p. 31).

SYNTHESIS: REALIST ONTOLOGY, SUBJECTIVIST EPISTEMOLOGY

As illustrated in Figure 1, the origins of the epistemological and ontological synthesis expressed by epistemic reflexivity may be traced to Kant (1781) where he argued: first, that a noumenal reality existed independently of cognition since a condition of human consciousness is that there must be something to be conscious about; second, that the *a priori* contents of the human mind anticipated and organized every sensory, or phenomenal, experience; while these innate grounds of experience, or transcendentals, were always present, they were also accessible to us through rational reflection. Today, Kant's transcendentals are usually construed as social in origin (Bourdieu, 1990; Sandywell, 1996; Steier, 1991) and their analysis, which we shall call epistemic reflexivity, has acquired a variety of labels which include: self-reflection (Habermas, 1974); socio-analysis (Bourdieu, 1984); infra-reflexivity (Latour, 1988); radical reflexivity (Pollner, 1991); reflexive realism

(Beck, 1996); and level 4 reflexivity (Holland, 1999). What drives this form of reflexivity is a desire to eschew what is seen as postmodernism's relativistic nihilism without recreating positivism's repressive discourses. Thus a recurring theme here is illustrated by Bourdieu's (1977, 1984, 1990) argument that any science is embedded in, and conditioned by, an underlying socially derived collective unconsciousness that conditions what is taken to be warranted knowledge. For Bourdieu reflexivity entails systematic reflection by the social scientist aimed at making the unconscious conscious and the tacit explicit so as to reveal how his/her formative social location or habitat, to which there is a corresponding habitus or set of embodied dispositions, influence any account. Bourdieu's aim is a social analysis of analysis which 'tries to gain control over the effects of social determinism which affect . . . scientific discourse itself' (1984, p. xiii). This must entail some form of metatheoretical examination of the presuppositions which management researchers have internalized as members of particular research communities and will inevitably deploy in both sense-making and dissemination to significant others in those communities (Hardy and Clegg, 1997). Here researchers must hold their own 'research structures and logics as themselves researchable and not immutable, and by examining how we are part of our own data, our research becomes a reciprocal process' (Steier, 1991, p. 7).

It follows that management research cannot be carried out in some intellectual space which is autonomous from the researcher's own habitus. Indeed it would seem that epistemic reflexivity must relate to how a researcher's own social location affects the forms and outcomes of research as well as entailing acceptance of the conviction that there will always be more than one valid account of any research. Therefore a key role of epistemic reflexivity is to negate the world as an objectively accessible social reality and denaturalize hegemonic accounts by exposing their modes of social organization and reproduction.

For instance Latour (1988) in a critique of hyper-reflexivity argues for 'infra-reflexivity' which is of the 'world not the word' and therefore entails a 'multiplicity of genres . . . not . . . the tedious presence of "reflexive loops" . . . genres which appertain to different interpretations of a world still unknown and despised' (Latour, 1988, p. 173). This assumed hermeneutic relationship with reality often entails a commitment to societal change through the transformation of knowledge. Thus Beck (1996, p. 7) demands a 'reflexive realism' where reality, social construction and the interpreter interact together so that the researcher has to be committed to investigation of how 'self evidence is produced, how questions are curtailed, how alternative interpretations are shut up in black boxes and so on'. Beck's call for the discursive democratization of social science through public critique resonates with Habermas' (1972, 1974) notion of the 'ideal-speech situation'.

In contrast to the 'legitimation crisis' created by postmodernists' 'linguistic turn' we might infer from Habermas' (1972) 'intersubjective turn' that for knowledge to be legitimate it must be grounded in the consensus achievable in an ideal speech

situation where discursively produced agreement is induced when it derives from argument and analysis without resort to coercion, distortion or duplicity. This communal consensus implies agreement not only regarding the outcomes of discourse but also upon the rules and logics of reasoning that lead to them. As with Beck (1996) this accords epistemic reflexivity a pivotal role: knowledge cannot and should not be the outcome of privileged access and dissemination by the authoritative few, rather legitimate knowledge must be the outcome of unconstrained public debate and agreement. Here Habermas relies upon a modified rationalism where rationality is not conceived as the egocentric reasoning of an epistemically privileged individual (see Dachler and Hoskin, 1995). Rather (socio)rational knowledge occurs in social relations that are established amongst people when they democratically negotiate their socially constructed definitions of reality (see also Arrington and Puxty, 1991).

However it is evident to Habermas that such a consensus is not attained in everyday social interaction due to the asymmetrical operation of power relations which systematically distort communication. Therefore it must remain a regulative epistemic ideal against which extant organizational practices may be assessed (Deetz, 1992; Forrester, 1993). Hence one important focus for epistemic reflexivity would be consideration of the extent to which social constructions in-use have been democratically arrived at rather than the outcome of power play (Coopey, 1995) and agreement rackets (Pastin, 1988). Here epistemic reflexivity is construed as emancipatory since it sanctions the investigation and problematization of the taken-for-granted social constructions of reality which are located in the varying practices, interests and motives which constitute different communities' sense making. Potentially this 'inquiry for change' (Guess, 1981) enables people to

... *alter their lives* by fostering in them the sort of self-knowledge and understanding of their social conditions which serve as a basis for such an alteration. (Fay, 1987, p. 23, emphasis added)

However while Habermas ostensibly retains a realist ontology,^[3] he does not indicate how this external referent may play a regulative role upon our social constructions. A complementary means of reflexively evaluating cognitive systems within this synthesis is illustrated by the notion that although our conceptualization and explanation of causal regularities must always be open to question, our ability to undertake practical actions that are successful and our ability to reflect upon and correct actions that seem unsuccessful, implies that we have feedback from an independent 'reality' which constrains and enables practices that would otherwise be inconceivable. In other words, praxis demands and enables processes of adjudication through the feedback that derives from the tolerance of that mind-independent spatio-temporal reality – that is their 'practical adequacy' (see also Arbib and Hesse, 1986; Sayer, 1981, 1992). This extension of epistemic reflexivity to praxis is also evident in Friere's (1972a, 1972b) work.

For Friere, the passivity engendered by what he calls a traditional 'education for domestication' where the 'undernourished' are 'fed' as if their consciousnesses were 'empty space' (Friere, 1972b, pp. 23–6) results in the 'introjection by the dominated of the cultural myths of the dominator' (1972a, p. 59) and forestalls the development of a critical consciousness (1972b, p. 46) that dismantles the current hegemonic constructions of vested interest. In contrast, Friere argues that the prerequisites for such developments are the recognition by actors of their present oppression and the understanding that a liberating education programme must be located in authentic dialogue between 'equally knowing subjects' (Friere, 1972b, p. 31). Here the intent is to engender, through epistemic reflexivity, new (socially constituted) self-understandings and simultaneously expose the interests which produce and disseminate management knowledge which was taken to be authoritative and hence unchallengeable (1972, p. 36). Hence epistemic reflexivity 'can teach people . . . to be aware that when they say or think something, they can be moved by causes as well as reasons' so that they learn 'to avoid being the toy of social forces' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, pp. 181–3). Importantly, such processes apply as much to the management researcher in his/her 'habitus' as to the actors in the 'habitus' under collaborative investigation (see also Mulkay, 1992). In other words, the denaturalization of social practices is an essential step in developing reflexive knowledge which could be utilized to identify and pursue alternative practices, dispositions and ends that result in 'socially transformative' actions which are commensurable with subjects' interests (see also Beck, 1992; Unger, 1987).

Hence the differences noted above within the synthetic position seem ones of emphasis. Both themes would eschew hyper-reflexivity yet affirm that epistemic reflexivity is a process that entails thinking about thinking which can only employ the limited thought processes available to us and hence is itself socially and historically conditioned. Thus the management researcher would have

. . . no new truths to bring to the world; these are all deeply embedded in people's own experiences and ways of defining their own worlds. The social scientist among them can only aid the actors in releasing the suppressed contents constituting their self-understandings. (Melucci, 1996, p. 224)

So a key point is that epistemic reflexivity reframes the management researcher's self knowledge but does not lead to a 'better' and more 'accurate' account. Rather by engendering the possibility of conscious variation of our constitutive assumptions epistemic reflexivity can denaturalize hegemonic accounts and can reclaim alternative accounts of the 'same' phenomena: 'transformative' redefinitions which thereby become available to transformative interventions (Alvesson, 1996; Alvesson and Deetz, 2000). It follows that our knowing selection of one knowledge system as opposed to an alternative becomes a question of ethical priority

(Rehg, 1994). Therefore epistemic reflexivity is seen as a resource which helps researchers recognize their own creative inputs and surfaces the ethical priorities which construct what we know about management (Kinchloe and McLaren, 1994). Here, due to their socio-rationalism, critical theorists would emphasize the role of epistemic reflexivity in enabling both the construction of new interpretations and the achievement of consensus. Meanwhile those committed to concepts like practical adequacy, extend epistemic reflexivity's role to engendering new forms of practice located in new versions of reality. The result is

... not so much a fixed location as a method of evaluating existing systems of knowledge, tied in as they are to sectional interests and constellations of power. It invites re-entry into the epistemological and sectional complexities of our human condition to intervene, 'knowingly' according to our ethical priorities. (Holland, 1999, p. 476)

In sum, from the orientation of this Kantian synthesis, management researchers should be concerned to develop new modes of engagement that allow subjects to pursue interests and objectives which are currently excluded by the dominant management discourses. As expressed in various forms of participatory management research (e.g. Power and Laughlin, 1992; Reason, 1994; Reason and Bradbury, 2001) through dialogue participants should democratically co-determine and co-develop the substantive basis of that knowledge so that their interests and objectives become metaphorically permitted and encoded into its 'gaze'. Facilitated by epistemic reflexivity, the management researcher's contribution must therefore focus upon the *processes* of the denaturalization rather than upon any substantive *content*: their role must be one of facilitating members' ability to comprehend themselves and their problems in new ways; to read and express their own organizational realities through their creation of their own texts; those texts would become the basis for reflexive action by enabling the development of knowledge and transformative strategies that are practically adequate for coping with and resolving members' own problems.

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper we have attempted to illustrate how three distinctive combinations of ontological and epistemological assumptions constitute three generic types of reflexivity in management research. Table I summarizes each form of reflexivity together with their implications for undertaking management research.

In many respects we have argued in this paper that different understandings of reflexivity and associated research practices arise according to particular combinations of constitutive assumptions about ontology and epistemology. As the table highlights, each approach suggests a markedly different mode of operation from

Table I. The implications for management research

<i>Type of reflexivity</i>	<i>Aims</i>	<i>Processes</i>	<i>Outcomes</i>	<i>Role of researcher</i>
Methodological	To nurture and sustain objectivity	Analysis of researcher behaviours to erase methodological lapses	Technicism/scientism which preserves privileged knowledge	Disinterested and sceptical expert
Deconstructive/hyper	To display and overturn constructive processes so as to invoke temporary alternative voices	Autopoietic deconstruction of deconstructions based upon duality of awareness	Discursive unsettling, repudiation of authoritative textual monologue and the development of new literary forms	Flaneur eliding with de-centred discourse deconstructor/narrative therapist
Epistemic	To emancipate by reclaiming control over social, ethical and metatheoretical subtexts of discourses	Dialogic sociorational analyses of the actors' and researcher's habitus	Denaturalization and the development of transformative redefinition/interventions ideally grounded in consensus	Committed process facilitator aware of his/her own habitus

the researcher. From a methodological perspective, the researcher maintains 'objectivity' and focuses on issues of validity and reliability of methods. Those working from a deconstructive/hyper perspective would engage in the unsettling of discourses including their own deconstructions so that there is no fixed end-point. In contrast, a researcher engaging in epistemic reflexivity adopts a participatory approach to increase awareness of their own habitus processes.

We do not suggest that management research is unique in the need for reflexivity on the part of the researcher or indeed the variety of forms of reflexivity that are available. Indeed we believe that these kinds of reflexivity and the related debates could and should apply to any scientific endeavour regardless of its substantive concerns. Our concern in this paper is to participate in the dialogue that is beginning about the possibility of reflexivity in research in general and in management research in particular. However, we also recognize that reflexivity is a central issue in the conduct of management itself. As we have noted, a variety of scholars have discussed the need for reflexivity amongst management practitioners either as an educational antidote to technicism (Chia and Morgan, 1996; Grey and Mitev, 1995), as a developmental device (Morgan, 1986, 1993), or as a

key aspect of everyday management praxis (Schon, 1983; Senge, 1990). This paper has attempted to contribute to this ongoing debate by presenting a metatheory that traces how different understandings of what it is to be reflexive are themselves constituted by management scholars. In a sense we are trying to be more reflexive about what reflexivity means and confronting the inevitable circularity that is at play.

However, as with any metatheory we cannot claim that the taxonomy we have put forward is exhaustive, rather we would point to its heuristic value that articulates the possibility of alternative philosophical repertoires in management research. Nevertheless any metatheory inevitably simplifies the relationships and connections within a substantive domain by only focusing upon the descriptive and explanatory power of particular constitutive assumptions. In other words by proposing this particular metatheory we return to the conundrum of epistemological circularity identified at the beginning of this paper. A key implication is that no one, including ourselves, can stand outside their own epistemological and ontological commitments. For instance, by attempting to interrogate the overarching structures of thought which justify particular reflexive stances, the very act of writing this kind of paper goes against both positivist notions of neutrality and postmodern abhorrence of the authoritative monologue. In this manner we confront circularity by undermining two of the positions we analyse and by sanctioning a third, in and through the very act of writing. Such processes are inevitable and perhaps the most we can hope for is to be aware of them and articulate them, so that, as two critical theorists have observed, 'no one is confused concerning the epistemological and political baggage they bring with them' (Kinchloe and McLaren, 1994, p. 140).

Management researchers committed to either hyper or epistemic reflexivity would see those who focus purely upon methodological reflexivity as dogmatic, since they exclude from scrutiny their own taken-for-granted beliefs. The probable riposte from those engaging solely in methodological reflexivity to such accusations would be the counter accusation of incipient and debilitating relativism, which militates against the social standing of the discipline as well as accessing scarce resources to the extent that theoretical and methodological development is inhibited (see Pfeffer, 1993). For instance, in the case of epistemic reflexivity, because it insists that researchers must confront and question the taken-for-granted assumptions which traditionally inform our knowledge claims and ultimately give meaning to our lives, it undermines the prized self-conception of intellectuals as underdetermined and autonomous (see Fay, 1987; Wacquant, 1992). In doing so, any claim that management research may be founded upon a technical imperative to improve organizational effectiveness and efficiency through objective analyses of how things really are, is undermined.

Such undermining is accelerated by the postmodernists' decentring of the author where even the possibility of rationally interrogating one's mode of engage-

ment is problematized since people can neither possess such agency and independent volition nor can they autonomously chose their discursive communities. In practice, those writing from a postmodern perspective who eschew Ashmore's (1989) demand for a fully-fledged hyper-reflexivity, yet wish to decentre the author through enabling the deconstruction of their account, often do provide biographical details to help the reader do this. At worst this type of confessional can risk appearing self indulgent – for example Judith Stacey (1990, p. 232) quotes Marshal Sahllin's report of an apocryphal exchange: 'But as the Fijian said to the New Ethnographer, "that's enough talking about you; lets talk about me'. It also raises the problem for postmodern authors of attempting to assess those aspects of their character which are of most importance in enabling such a deconstruction to be conducted.

Notwithstanding these difficulties the arrival of postmodernism within management studies has opened the door to the possibility of polyphonous research texts where multiple voices can be heard. Unfortunately though, as Markus comments, 'often as not it ends by reinforcing the perspective of the lone introspective field worker' (1994, p. 395). Ironically this may encourage a relative silence regarding the research communities in which the researcher is embedded (Hardy and Clegg, 1997).

In contrast epistemic reflexivity encourages the overt recognition of the importance of the management researcher's habitus. We have represented this third form of reflexivity as synthesis because it goes beyond the methodological in that the researcher is not seen as an autonomous, objective, assessor. There is also recognition of the multiple voices and perspectives that occur and the need for researchers to deconstruct their accounts. However unlike the relativism that underpins hyper-reflexivity, the hope of achieving some notion of truth is maintained – to be achieved through consensus and/or praxis. Thus postmodernism's fear of intervention and discursive closure (see Newton, 1996) is replaced by a moral imperative to engender democratic social relationships and thereby shift the balance of power to currently marginalized groups (see Greenwood and Levin, 1998; Gustavsen, 2001; Kemmis and McTaggart, 2000). The result would be a challenge to traditional management prerogatives and the negotiation of alternative renditions of reality which create novel questions, inaugurate new problems and make new forms of organizational practice sensible and possible (Gaventa and Cornwall, 2001; Park, 2001).

In implementing epistemic reflexivity the major challenge remains that of achieving democratic co-operation between researchers and researched. As detailed by Johnson and Duberley (2000), adopting a critical perspective whereby researchers and researched work together to develop transformative redefinitions and interventions is not without problems. Perhaps the fundamental difficulty lies in the power relations central to the research process. For example it is senior managers who have the power to provide access to organizations, yet they may find

such collaborative research unattractive – particularly where it involves hierarchical subordinates. Researchers may then find themselves attempting a difficult balancing act between meeting the predilections of organizational gatekeepers and at the same time challenging existing structures. Management research embracing epistemic reflexivity would be ill served by researchers becoming cheap consultants. From another perspective it is researchers who have the power to write up the research, indeed generally their power extends much further than this with regard to choice of subject, and perceived expertise with regard to choice of method. No matter how much they may try to engage those being researched in writing up research they usually maintain their status as author. They may also have to work very hard to avoid the temptation of dismissing the ‘false consciousness’ of those who disagree with their own (ideological) stance. Such problems have, for instance, opened critical theorists to the postmodernist riposte of ‘essentialism’: that they presuppose the existence of structurally based oppression lying beneath appearances. For postmodernists this amounts to an unsustainable grand narrative which arbitrarily ‘assumes the validity of their own truth claims’ (Rosenau, 1992, p. xi) and which merely replaces the old voices of authority with a new hierarchy of truth.

Thus whilst epistemic reflexivity encourages researchers towards praxis, to work at the nexus of theory and practice, and to critically assess their role in doing this, it should not be assumed that its implementation is easy. Here we must not underestimate the role that the researcher’s own community plays in sanctioning particular representative practices, whose norms may exclude the dissemination of the outcomes of collaborative inquiry (Reason and Bradbury, 2001). This creates a key challenge for management researchers whose own survival may depend upon writing for and presenting to a community whose quality and validity criteria are at odds with those that derive from their epistemological and ontological commitments. For instance the technician and empiricist imperatives which many commentators (e.g. Alvesson, 1987; Grey and Mitev, 1995; Reed and Anthony, 1992; Whitley, 1984) have repeatedly observed in both business practitioner and academic communities may militate against any extension of reflexivity beyond the methodological. Indeed it could be argued that resistance to both hyper and epistemic reflexivity is only to be expected in management research. For example, as Willmott (1993, p. 534) infers, the homogenization of values and norms within organizations fostered by the recent vogue for corporate cultism may frustrate the development of both hyper and epistemic reflexivity amongst practitioners. Similarly the ‘hegemony of apparent rationality that typifies conventions in academic publishing’ (Learmonth, 1999, p. 1010) may restrict the academic profession from engaging in such forms of reflexive discourse.

In sum, epistemic reflexivity does not provide any simple solutions, nevertheless it does sensitize us to the existence of an array of problems, their dynamics and implications. For instance in the social production of accounts for significant others

in their research communities it sensitizes us to be aware of what might be written and presented until these communities are themselves successfully challenged. Hence Grundy's demand for dialogue 'to promote a critical consciousness which exhibits itself in political and practical action to promote change' (1987, p. 154) applies as much to the management researcher's relations with his/her research communities as it does to the process and outcomes of their research. However, working to meet these challenges whilst maintaining awareness of one's epistemological position seems to us to be an exciting avenue for management researchers. We hope that this paper contributes to such a dialogue.

NOTES

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- [1] As Haack (1987) has demonstrated, the term realism has a variety of different meanings and therefore it is difficult to identify an agreed and coherent realist position or contribution. For instance realism is usually defined as a rejection of the subjectivist ontologies currently put forward by postmodernists. Hence realists are united by a rejection of the view that the world is created by the minds of human observers. Moreover, as Trigg (1980, p. vii) observes, a key characteristic of realism is 'the notion of objectivity – of things being the case whether people recognize them or not'. When left at this definition it is evident that realism could be embraced by a variety of different positions including positivism. However causing much of the confusion that surrounds realism is that some commentators go so far as to see no difference between realism and positivism.

Here, if we take Rorty's work as an example, Rorty attempts to demolish the notion that it is possible for any knowledge, scientific or otherwise, to be an accurate representation of the external world. However Rorty associates the demise of such positivistic notions with the necessary demise of realism (1979, p. 7). Through this discursive play, Rorty limits realism to what is often called 'empirical realism' (e.g. Schlick, 1981) where what is real is only that which may be observed and measured – in other words the objects of direct sensory experience. By what amounts to a definitional legerdemain alternative renditions of realism are in effect silenced. For Beck (1996, p. 7) the unfortunate result is the mistaken, yet only too common, view that ontological realism and subjectivist epistemologies have to be mutually exclusive. Similarly Margolis (1986, p. 283) argues that there is a clear connection between what he calls metaphysical (i.e. ontological) realism – that the structures of the world do not depend upon the cognitive structures of human investigators, and what he calls epistemological realism (i.e. objectivism) – the view that such structures are cognitively accessible to those investigators. For Margolis much of 'realism' embraces both aspects (see also Putnam, 1981). Yet despite this norm for interweaving metaphysical and epistemological realism, and although the epistemological necessitates prior acceptance of the metaphysical, the acceptance of the metaphysical does not necessarily entail the acceptance of the epistemological. In a similar manner Trigg (1980, pp. 55–9) argues that what reality is and how we have conceived it are different questions since many things are beyond our conceptual and linguistic capacities. The position of Margolis and Trigg is similar to Bhaskar's (e.g. 1978, 1986) differentiation between the 'intransitive objects of scientific inquiry' that exist and act independently of their identification in human knowledge and the 'transitive', socially constructed, dimension (i.e. epistemology) that allows us to make sense of our world(s). According to Bhaskar, the products of science are always transitive, but they are about an intransitive object because

... if changing experience of object is to be possible, objects must have a distinct being in space and time from the experience of which they are the objects. For Kepler to see the rim of the earth drop away, while Tycho Brahe watches the sun rise, must presuppose that there is something that they both see (in different ways). Similarly when modern sailors refer to what

ancient mariners called a sea-serpent as a school of porpoises, we must suppose that there is something which they are describing in different ways. (1978, p. 31)

- [2] To avoid terminological confusion here we follow Alvesson and Deetz (2000, pp. 60–74) and use the term neo-empiricism to denote those management researchers who place a reliance upon empirical evidence as capable of ensuring objective truth yet simultaneously reject the positivist ideal of discovering laws through deploying hypothetico-deductive methods. Instead neo-empiricists rely upon qualitative methods to describe the meanings that members deploy in making sense of their worlds and thereby inductively generate grounded theory. In doing so, neo-empiricists assume: a realist ontology; a theory neutral observational language; that researchers can authoritatively develop theories about social reality and embrace the ideal of a correspondence theory of truth (see also Lincoln and Denzin, 1994; Putham et al., 1993).
- [3] Like Kant, Habermas puts forward a phenomenalist position that human cognition shapes reality through its imposition of apriori object constituting epistemological categories which ‘determine the aspects under which reality is objectified and thus can be made accessible to experience to begin with’ (1974, pp. 8–9). In this Habermas accepts the existence of a reality independent of human cognition which imposes limits upon human endeavours through ‘the contingency of its ultimate constants’ (1972, p. 33).

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