Unifying Research and Practice Through Concrete Personal Knowing

Dr. Carol Steiner
School of Management

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Dr Carol Steiner can be contacted as follows:
Phone: 9925 1353
Email: carol.steiner@rmit.edu.au.
Abstract

This philosophical paper suggests that almost all academic research is conducted under the influence of a “technicity paradigm” which renders it irrelevant to everyday practice because of its emphasis on objectivity, generalisability and rationality. The paper explores the fundamental characteristics of academic research under the influence of technicity and explains how this influence removes the concrete and personal dimension from the knowledge produced and creates a gap between esoteric and practical knowledge that must be bridged in order for vocational education to be effective. The paper ends with a reflection on what academic research might be like if it could escape the influence of technicity and become concrete and personal. It suggests such research can be rigorous, holistic, reflective, relevant to practice and transformational for students seeking to enter a profession like management.
Introduction

Business schools are the site of continuing struggles and debates between people who see themselves as teachers and those who see themselves as researchers and between those who doubt the importance of theory or those who laud the indispensability of theory to business education. In this paper, I explore the origins of these struggles and debates because I think business educators could benefit from turning our critical attention to the founding beliefs of our academic paradigms, beliefs that may underpin the unnecessary gaps between theory and practice, research and practice, and research and teaching. The aim of this paper is to unify research and practice by reclaiming a place for concrete and personal knowing in both. The philosophical framework of this paper uses Martin Heidegger’s concepts of ‘technicity’ (Heidegger, 1977a) and ‘research’ (Heidegger, 1977b).

According to Heidegger, we live in an epoch of technicity. At the root of the epoch of technicity lies a belief in rationality as a solution to almost every problem, but especially to problems of control (Heidegger 1977a, 1977b). The epoch of technicity is also characterised by scientism, specialisation and abstraction. Many of these characteristics are manifest in ‘research,’ a special way of making, acquiring and evaluating knowledge based on specialisation, efficiency of knowledge production (Heidegger 1977b), and detachment of what is studied from its usual context so that researchers can focus on the area of special interest and be most efficient (Heidegger, 1996). ‘Research,’ in a Heideggerian scheme, is the rigorous, institutionalised pursuit of certainty through rational, objective representation of experience.

‘Research’ as a manifestation of the epoch of technicity is distinguished from ‘scholarship’ as a way of acquiring knowledge (Heidegger, 1977c). Research involves the frantic accumulation of specialist knowledge for its own sake, as the basis for expertise and for the power to control the territory defined as the specialist discipline. To facilitate this accumulation, research relies on agreed and controllable methods for accumulating and evaluating knowledge to permit division of labour and a faster aggregation of a body of knowledge valuable to the discipline (Heidegger, 1977b). These ‘methods’ rely on and
create the characteristics of research-driven knowledge making in the epoch of technicity: scientism, abstraction and rationalism.

Scientism

Scientism characterises research in the epoch of technicity not just because people count and measure empirical phenomena but because, from their standpoint of belief in one people-centred scenario of knowledge production or another, an entire schema of operation emerges that determines their research. Heidegger (1977b) calls such a schema ‘the rule and law of science’ and says science requires ‘binding adherence’ to that rule and law. Kuhn (1970) calls this phenomenon ‘a paradigm.’ People who don't toe the paradigm line are considered incompetent and unreliable outsiders; to be an insider is to understand and accept the rule and law of one's paradigm. The rule of science refers to the prescription of a domain, a set of practices and an attitude to the world. These are the equivalents of such Kuhnian paradigm elements as world view, values, techniques, symbolic generalisations and exemplars. The law of science manages the match between the rule of science and the knowledge emerging from that rule, ensuring that the rule adjusts so that it is never too out of sync with what is known. Kuhn discusses the rule and law of science in terms of how ‘normal science’ deals with minor anomalies between paradigm-sanctioned ‘facts’ and emerging, contrary ones.

The rule and law of science (paradigms) create a closed system of knowing that permits what Hacking calls ‘the self-vindication of science’ (Hacking, 1992): whatever science discovers or proves emerges from and fits within its closed system of paradigm understanding. If it doesn’t, it is usually assumed that there was something wrong with the methodology, rarely with the paradigm understanding itself, except in the case of minor anomalies that emerge through ‘normal science’ and that can be resolved within the rule and law of science.

This closed system that results from the rule and law of science facilitates efficient knowledge production, but it also renders the knowledge abstract from everyday reality because the paradigm understanding on which such knowledge is based (the closed system) represents a discipline-specific ‘take’ on that reality. Sometimes when fledgling business ‘researchers’ study what companies actually do to determine best practice, their
research output is criticised for lack of an adequate theoretical framework, which is code for being too involved with everyday reality and not sufficiently involved with abstract paradigm reality. The gap between theory and practice that scientism relies on shows itself, and the fledgling ‘researchers’ are denied admittance to the paradigm community because they don’t know how the closed system operates. They are not deemed competent researchers because they don’t follow the prescriptions of their professional paradigm.

**Specialisation and Abstraction**

Paradigm communities both reflect and encourage research specialisation. Specialisation is a response to the technicity-inspired desire for control. It is easier to control the small and simple than the big and complex. In rendering phenomena manageable, the domain of interest narrows.

Specialisation is also a response to the technicity-inspired pursuit of efficiency. The most effective way to improve the efficiency of research is to narrow the field of study and increase the numbers of knowledge-makers who can work cooperatively on the task. The most effective way to do the former is to detach (physically or conceptually) the objects of study from their complicated contexts. This is the essence of the reductivism and abstraction that characterise Western thinking in this epoch and that produce research specialties. Heidegger calls this process of reduction and abstraction that characterises research ‘thematisation.’ The most effective way to do the latter -- to enable more people to work cooperatively in the same discipline -- it is necessary to render their diversity uniform or immaterial to the work. This is the origin of the myth of objectivity as an aim and prescription for effective knowledge making.

*Thematisation of the World*

Heidegger (1996) described a holistic, *concrete* world constituted by all our life experiences, even the mundane and fleeting, and both personal experiences and those handed down to us by others through education and socialisation. The phenomena of all these experiences are linked together to create their significance, their ontological essence, the concrete world of our experience. The connectedness of this holistic world
is undermined by *thematisation* which detaches phenomena and people from their places within its context.

Thematisation is the mechanism for delimiting domains of research interest. Thematisation confines a researcher’s focus to the ‘theme’ of most interest to the researcher’s paradigm. Thematisation influences how much of the holistic concrete world we experience because thematisation determines how open we are to the holistic world, how much we are prepared to consider significant.

Researchers are usually open only to experiences that fit the pre-determined paradigm parameters of their research specialty. These parameters effectively detach phenomena from their holistic context by rendering other phenomena in that context insignificant or irrelevant to the research task. This reduction simplifies the phenomena of interest, but it diminishes their concreteness by ignoring their contextuality. This is the essence of *abstraction* -- taking something away from its concrete context and reducing and simplifying it. This is how researchers create abstract theory. This is also the source of the gap between theory and practice because practice is much more contextualised than the theoretical insights that emerge from thematisation.

For example, management researchers regularly reduce people to abstract employees by detaching them from their holistic context which includes experiences and phenomena unrelated to the employing organisation or work matters. They then study these abstractions within the limited context of an HR or IR issue or problem. What they learn through such research is often difficult to re-integrate with the complex context of a real organisation populated by real people.

**Thematisation of Researchers**

Thematisation also *reduces researchers* who feel compelled to conform to the parameters and interests of their discipline, to confine their interests and efforts to their specialised abstract world. Researchers are said to be reduced because, in a Heideggerian scheme, *we are the world we experience*. Without a concrete world to fill our lives with meaning, we are an empty space, what Heidegger calls ‘the there.’ Interestingly, Heidegger claims the world does not have meaning; it has only significance. Only people
have meaning. Only people can be meaning-ful, full of the significance of the world. (Heidegger, 1996, p. 142) When we are filled with a thematically reduced world of significance, we are less meaningful. When we thematise, we reduce ourselves to a discipline-defined identity. We become merely researchers rather than whole and diverse individuals with a more meaningful identity and a more significant world in which to exist.

Researchers are also reduced in another way by thematisation. To be human, in a Heideggerian scheme, is to be in-the-world, to be involved with the holistic world from a unique place in it. Each person has the ontological potential to experience the world from that unique perspective. But when people create abstract worlds through identification with a discipline or profession, their unique place in the world disappears and is replaced by an impersonal ‘one.’ This loss of a uniquely personal role or place in experience is acknowledged in the concept of objectivity.

The now out-of-fashion concept of objectivity in research reflects an interesting delusion. Postmodern researchers in particular, by acknowledging and embracing their own subjectivity, imagine they have escaped the myth of objectivity. But they are simply on the other side of the same coin. The aim of objectivity as a requirement for sound research is to enable the efficient production of generalisable knowledge by eliminating the most unreliable variable, the subjective researcher. In such a system, knowledge can only be sanctioned if it can be replicated by anyone, anywhere, using the same sanctioned methods.

A few researchers persist in this belief, but most other researchers, especially postmodern ones, no longer believe in the possibility of such absolute replication. Yet they still seem to believe in the generalisability of their subjective knowledge, much to the amusement or dismay of scientistic researchers. Believing in the generalisability of their own subjective experiences means they believe their own experiences to be the same as those of others whom they expect will see things their way. As long as we believe that others can see the world as we see it, we have still lost our unique place in the concrete world, detached ourselves from it, and taken up an objective ‘subject position’ in the abstract world of our making. This is the other detachment that comes from thematisation, our personal detachment from the concrete world.
This dual detachment -- detachment of phenomena from the concrete world of complex significance and detachment of researchers from their own unique places in that concrete world -- renders the products of such detachment abstract, removed from the rich context of familiar, everyday reality. Detachment and the resulting abstraction render the products of research esoteric, exclusively accessible and significant only to the paradigm community that produces them. The esoteric nature of research knowledge creates the gap between research and practice, between theory and practice, between the ivory tower and the down and dirty world of work.

**Rationalism**

At the root of scientism and abstraction lies rationalism. Technicity is the full flower of rationalism. The seeds of technicity, rationalism, scientism and abstraction were planted in ancient Greece. Heidegger suggests that the seeds of technicity were sown by Plato when Plato changed the meaning of ‘idea’ (eidos). He says ‘idea’ used to refer to the visible aspect of something, but that Plato extracts of this word...something utterly extraordinary: that it names what precisely is not and never will be perceivable with physical eyes...[idea] names and is also that which constitutes the essence in the audible, the tastable, the tactile, in everything that is in any way accessible. (Heidegger, 1977a, p. 20)

When ‘idea’ no longer refers to what appears but to the invisible essential form of it, then our own experience becomes questionable and we need a higher source to validate our experience. Descartes provided this in the convenient form of self-certifying rationality. No longer could knowledge emerge from some mysterious but pure revelation of reality. Now knowledge could emerge only when some knowing subject thought it.

Our inheritance from Plato and Descartes, via a coterie of other rationalist thinkers including Husserl, is a belief in ‘rational’ thinking that deprecates ‘unsupported’ common sense and individual experience, that denies the existence of phenomena that do not conform to the approved vision of the world, and that dismisses any thinking that departs from rationalism's methodological prescriptions. This is Heidegger's description of the rule and law of science, Kuhn's description of paradigmatic science and modern social
studies of knowledge's description of science (e.g., Hacking, 1992; Lynch, 1993; Pickering, 1992, 1993). It seems scientism, rationalism and research cannot be disengaged from each other.

But why has rationalism emerged as a defining characteristic of the epoch of technicity? The answer probably lies in rationalism’s capacity to create a sense of control. Control is a central value in the epoch of technicity. Control relates to the power to define and assign, to place within a framework (*Gestell*) (Heidegger, 1977a). The urge to control is manifest in research in the proliferation of new terms and names for familiar phenomena, in the propensity to analyse everything into its component parts as a way to get a handle on things, and in the popularity of charts, graphs and models that can capture and stabilise dynamic relations -- all the products of abstract rationalism and scientism.

This is a quite different notion of control than we normally associate with the power to govern or the power to manipulate. It relates more to *ontological power*, the power to say what and how something is. The gaps between research and practice and theory and practice represent a struggle over the ontology of the phenomena and people in the worlds of research and work. When the jargon, the over-analysis and the cooked up models stretch the credulity of the practically inclined to breaking point, the gap opens like a groaning chasm. The denigration of research and theory represents a refusal to grant ontological control of the world of work to the forces of scientism, rationalism and abstraction.

But is it possible to be a researcher without succumbing to scientism, rationalism and abstraction? Probably not. But I think it is possible to be a scholar. But can a scholar contribute anything to practice?
Scholarship and Practice

I think scholars can make huge contributions to practice, so long as they remain committed to concrete, personal experience rather than to abstract, esoteric, paradigm prescribed experience, and so long as they remain modest and respectful in their interactions with phenomena.

Their scholarship would have to replace the conventional, rationalist belief in the theory-ladenness of all experience with a belief in the constitutive power of history. In such scholarship, history constitutes personal experience; history is what we experience. But this history is not the familiar and now oft-challenged product of what Heidegger (1996) calls historiology. Historiology produces the tedious, contentious, rationalist narratives comprising strings of abstract ‘facts’ of another time. In contrast, history is preserved human experiences that precede our own and that are handed down to us, not as discrete experiences but as the holistic world of significance, a world of things, relations and human purposes, all interconnected and there for us to experience from our unique perspective among them.

The activity of such scholarship begins with merely opening up to the historically given world of experience. But this is not a scholarly activity; it is a human activity and requires no special expertise. The first ‘product’ of this passive opening up is understanding, a simple ‘taking in’ of what is there to experience. This understanding is what is limited by technicity-influenced researchers deciding to open only to a paradigm-delimited world.

Scholars, or anyone who wants a deeper understanding of the world, can then ‘interpret’ their understanding. But this interpreting does not involve adding anything to the understanding. It is not a synthetic process. Rather, it involves attending more closely to our understanding, reflecting on it. Since what is being experienced is a holistic, historic world of interrelated phenomena, whatever phenomenon is experienced initially can lead to other phenomena to which it is linked as part of its context. Interpretive reflecting involves noticing and following phenomenal links to a context of wider significance. Thus, interpretation broadens and deepens our understanding by enriching the significant context of our experiences. But much of the enriching potential of interpretation is lost
when research paradigms render parts of the phenomenon's context irrelevant, insignificant, off-limits, outside the domain of interest.

**Just Another Paradigm?**

Although this account of scholarship makes understanding and interpretation seem like a vague methodology, I think the notion of scholarship is more appropriately understood as an attitude rather than an action plan. This attitude of human passivity to and respect for the phenomena of experience (the world) is expressed in what Heidegger refers to as the methodological maxims of phenomenology: ‘Not to flee prematurely from the enigmatic character of phenomena, nor to explain it away by the violent *coup de main* of a wild theory, but rather to accentuate the puzzlement.’ (Heidegger, 1988, p. 69)

But what *researcher* can tolerate the enigmatic character of phenomena? Better to analyse it, categorise it, name it, label it, diagram it, model it and render it clear if not controllable. What researcher can resist proffering a theory that can be cited and recited widely so people (especially students) have a shortcut to understanding that saves them examining their own personal experiences of the world? To researchers it matters little if such a theory violates the ontological integrity of phenomena while emphasising the power of rationalism. And what researcher would actually commit to print, ‘I don't get it.’ Even the pseudo-Socratic affectation of claiming to raise questions rather than provide answers is nothing more than what scientists think of as ‘defining the problem.’ It is an attempt to set the research agenda, define the research domain. Unanswered questions are the engine that drives Kuhnian ‘normal science,’ but *unanswerable* questions are the bane of a researcher's existence (and a total nightmare for students).

But don't these maxims constitute just one more *prescription* for one more ology? Just another alternative paradigm for another specialist discipline?

If the maxims are a prescription for anything, they are a negative prescription -- stop trying to get a handle on phenomena, stop forcing phenomena into frameworks not their own, stop trying to make knowledge. But such exhortations are not intended to limit our personal engagement with the world as a paradigm prescription does. Rather, they are seeking to bring to light *more possibilities* for such engagement. Heidegger considered
this our prime responsibility to others, to help them see their own enhanced potential as human beings. The methodological maxims of phenomenology say, ‘try me and see what happens.’

Also, I don't see phenomenology as a discipline. It has no specialist domain, it has no rule and law, and no phenomenologist would or could presume to enforce binding adherence. Phenomenology is what Heim (1982) calls ‘the performance of philosophic thought.’ (Heim, 1982, p. 206) Phenomenology is the study of phenomena, reflective engagement with all that can be experienced and with the sources of that experience. Nothing is excluded in this holistic domain. I read the maxims of phenomenology as a description of one possible way to relate to phenomena. It is not the only way; it is not even the optimal way in all circumstances. But it is a decidedly different way to relate to the world than researchers adopt. It is a way of relating to the world that we more commonly expect of artists, so-called primitive peoples, the mentally ill, the unconventional (professional or social misfits) and, most recently, ‘transformational leaders’ in business (e.g., Bass et al., 1987; Gundrey et al., 1994; Katzenbach, 1996; Kotter, 1990; Spreitzer and Quinn, 1996; Story, 1995; Teal, 1996).

This way of relating is not prescribed by phenomenology. It is not a paradigm to be adopted and adhered to. Rather, this way of relating to the world is highlighted as an overlooked possibility available to human beings who tire of a paradigmatic existence. It cannot be a prescription or a paradigm because the uniquely personal nature of the relationship cannot be standardised or generalised. Phenomenology as an approach to scholarship will have as many manifestations as there are scholars and these scholars need not identify with phenomenology as a credo; they don't even need to know its name.

So what might research look like if we were to relate to the world phenomenologically?
Phenomenological ‘Research’

‘Research’ might take on a more classical cast. For example, we might get serious about the literature review, about reading more widely, more deeply, more historically. The literature review now is done with the benefit of keyword searches through thematised databases, making it difficult to escape the reduced domains of our disciplines and the fleeting currentness of our knowledge. If the richness of our experiences comes not just from our present circumstances but from our education and socialisation, then the more we read and reflect on the past, the greater can be our understanding of the significance of the present and the potential of the future. This does not mean we should read more historiographical accounts of the past. It means we should read the original, historic accounts written by our intellectual ‘heroes,’ rather than settle for second-, third- and fourth-hand potted versions of their thought.

‘Research’ would also take longer because we wouldn't have reductive ‘instruments’ to gather data. We would have to watch and listen and do by ourselves or with others. Then we'd have to share our experiences with each other and try to understand their significance. Understanding their significance would involve trying to understand how everything we’ve learned fits together. ‘Research’ would become a holistic rather than analytic process, a complicating rather than simplying process, a puzzle-creating rather than puzzle-solving process. ‘Research’ without the reductive instruments might also be cheaper. Scholars only need libraries and time to do their work (and maybe communication technology).

‘Research’ output might become more like conversations with wise elders or perspicacious Youngsters, people who speak only for themselves but whose messages are meaningful, inspiring and insightful. They do not provide answers. They not make us feel knowledgeable. Rather, they make us modest. Such people show us by their example what an individual can accomplish, the potential of an individual to understand the world. But they also show the limits of that understanding, how even the most wise and perspicacious individual stills remains full of questions and wondering.
The aim of such ‘research’ is not definitive truth or even persuasive argument. Rather, its aims are to raise questions and enrich understanding. There is no competition for paradigm control. Contrary viewpoints need not be reconciled. Knowledge need not be verified or refuted. There is no need for credentialed expertise or for legitimating academies. There are no discipline boundaries to defend, extend or exceed. There will be self-identified scholars but no barrier to being one.

‘Research’ like this is difficult, perhaps even foolish, in the present academic climate which is also a reflection of the epoch of technicity. Until the academic paradigm changes, we will still need to publish more rather than better papers. We will have to build reputations for ourselves. We will have to get through review processes. But do we have to play the game so well, so enthusiastically, so unreflectively?

**Scholarly Practice**

But what could scholarship contribute to practice in the world of work? What can scholarship do that research can’t do?

First, scholarship as previously described could not be separated from practice, and scholars could not be distinguished from practitioners. Anyone who was prepared to open themselves to the full significance of the world around them and to reflectively interpret what they experienced in a personal way would be a scholar. There would be no call to dismiss someone as ‘only an academic’ or to denigrate someone as ‘only a practitioner.’

Second, scholars would work in the world of work as they interpret the world of work. Scholars do not create a world distinct from the world they wish to study. They don’t decontextualise, thematise, sample or limit the scope of their ‘research.’ Consequently, their understanding and interpretations of the significance of the world they experience are likely to be relevant, interesting, even familiar, to the practitioners in that world. Hence, the notion of theory as something distinct from practice would lose its currency. The product of scholarship would be a richer understanding of a concrete experience, not a generalised explanation of an abstract one.
Third, scholarly understanding and interpretation would be unique and personal rather than paradigmatically determined. This would enrich the world of significance in which everyone operated, doing away with unimaginative, predictable and inflexible understanding. Unique, personal understanding and interpretations would help everyone make better decisions, based on a broader understanding of the circumstances and people involved.

Finally, the scholars themselves would be ‘authentic’ and free to experience the world from their unique place in it. Scholars cannot be confined to pre-designed roles. They are rarely predictable in their behaviour or decisions. They are likely to be seen as creative when creativity is understood as unconventional. This is because scholars manifest their ontological individuality by rejecting paradigm conformity.

Bringing scholarship and practice together legitimates the experiences of all involved. Acknowledging that concrete, personal knowing can be valuable to ‘research’ as well as to practice allows concrete, personal knowing to unify practice and ‘research’ and thereby transform them both.
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