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Editorial

Political Impact of Research

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Abstract

Discussions on political impact broaden our understanding of the impact of academic research and deepen our awareness of underlying and socially constructed dynamics that determine the very meaning of what will be collectively understood as impact. Three major types of impact can be considered when discussing how researchers can fully observe the political impact of their research: (a) promotion of emancipation and critical thinking, (b) promotion of debates on the public interest and (c) contribution of the study results to the process of denaturalizing knowledge considered as neutral. The political impacts of academic research represent the future development of societies and organizations, as they make life viable in a collective, social and democratic context. If so, why are we still unable to substantiate, enable and operationalize such consideration into our scientific research metrics and guidelines?

Keywords: impact; research; politics; critical studies.

Introduction

The economic, cultural and social impacts that academic research can generate are unquestionable. However, misconceptions about the very meaning of impact and its dimensions are at the heart of the debate. When we think about the impact of academic research, we immediately

think of innovations, processes, economic production, improvement in living conditions and influence on public investment and financing decisions. This immediate association can exclude the intrinsic motivations of researchers and deepen the concealment of the political dimension of knowledge (Chubb & Reed, 2018; Reale et al., 2018), from academic production and, consequently, its impacts.

We made progress in terms of evaluating the scientific, social and political impact of the social sciences and humanities. However, measuring the impact of research in terms of what was generated to increase the country's scientific competitiveness, the creation of wealth, improvements in productivity and social well-being remains a problem (Reale et al., 2018). The system to evaluate graduate studies in Brazil observes the economic, social and cultural impact of graduate programs in their training and research activities for the spheres of society, government and market. These impact guidelines can favor and prioritize certain types of studies, in terms of their theoretical, epistemological and theoretical choices. On the other hand, they can also affect the intrinsic motivations of researchers. Analyzing the field of research in management, Wood Jr. and Costa (2015) emphasize the criticism arguments towards the assessment system of graduate studies in Brazil; most arguments signal that the dominant criteria for measuring the impact of scientific production stimulate productivism, distorting the mission of science and not contributing to the quality of Brazilian scientific production (Wood Jr. & Costa).

In contrast, in the field of management, scholars and researchers find many issues addressed from several theoretical perspectives and epistemologies. In particular, the thematic diversity of organizational studies (for example: organizational structures, organizational behavior, ethics, gender, power and politics) shows that the field is both affected by and reflects on the problems of society, with theoretical contributions and practical implications. Therefore, the concept of research impact expected in the field of management, given its epistemic characteristics, is different from that of areas such as the so-called hard sciences, health and technology. It is thus necessary to improve the institutional environment so that research in Brazil can achieve greater relevance and impact (Wood Jr. & Costa, 2015).

In short, the keyword for research evaluation is impact, which must be considered in our research activities in its various dimensions. Regarding this variety, we will focus on the political impact of research. We argue that the knowledge generated from research in management is, in general, imbricated in power relations posed by institutions (Foucault, 1999). Indeed, reflecting on political impact shows new avenues to broaden and sophisticate our understanding of the impact of academic research. This reflection allows for a deeper awareness of underlying and socially constructed dynamics that determine the very meaning of what comes to be collectively understood as impact.

Political dimension of society and organizations

Knowledge is inseparable from power (Foucault, 1999). The truth regimes of a society – called by Foucault (2004) as the “general policy” of each society's truth – are products of multiple coercions, establishing power regulations (2004, p. 12). Each society, with its specific mechanisms, chooses the knowledge that works as the truth. The same way they sanction some mechanisms,

each society distinguishes what is false from the truth, valuing what techniques and procedures produce the truth.

For Foucault (1999), scientific knowledge is built through a complex process of rationalization, identification and classification of objects. However, he emphasizes that knowledge is that produced by an individual in an interactive and subtle process, vulnerable to constant changes. Power relations that express those who command and those who obey are established in the generation of scientific knowledge: “we are forced to produce the truth by the power that demands this truth and that needs it to function, we have to tell the truth, we are coerced, we are condemned to confess the truth or find it” (p. 29).

As Mitre (2016) questions, is the relationship between science and politics paradoxical? On the one hand, science gains legitimacy for being able to guide the elaboration and execution of public policies. On the other hand, it may have its legitimacy threatened by the link with arguments defended in the political field (Gieryn, 1983). In this context, group interests come under dispute, with the idea that science is socially constructed emerging, as interests and ideologies bring implications for the acceptance or rejection of scientific postulates (Brown, 2009). The sociology of scientific knowledge has argued that social factors may provide a better understanding of scientific facts (Bloor, 1991), holding that reality is socially constructed (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

Politics is a central dimension in the construction of academic research when considering the social construction of science (Latour, 1987; Latour & Woolgar, 1986). Since knowledge is political, the attempt to separate science and politics due to a supposed scientific objectivity does not mean the social totality affecting the studied phenomena is eliminated. In the field of management, in which the relations between organizations and society are central, research aimed at generalizing knowledge and scientific neutrality (proper to the natural sciences) represents a dangerous pretense or trap. The consideration of context, values, power and specific interests can generate more conscious and considerate research results, covering a broader socio-historical-temporal perspective. Such results can even generate innovative new perspectives that better explain the phenomenon studied, leading to better actions to transform reality (Clegg & Palmer, 1996; Flyvbjerg, 2006).

Organizations and management are social and political constructions. They result from the interactions between the actors involved, who both interpret and influence them. Scientific production on organizations and management generates knowledge with political impact if transforms the studied reality. Therefore, research must involve participants who are native to their empirical field to leverage the generation of results that can be useful for the policies and practices of the context studied (Misoczky, Flores, & Moraes, 2010; Paes de Paula, 2007).

One of the central issues in the political impact of research in management is linked to the relationship between society and profit-oriented companies. This relationship is marked by the leading role of companies in social, technological and economic transformations that impact consumer behavior, lifestyles and work ethic, while restricting access to natural resources. These relationships are paradoxical given the scenario of imbalance that contemporary society finds itself. For example, we face constant imbalances between technological advance and levels of poverty and economic and social inequality, between improved productivity rates and respect for human rights and environmental sustainability and environmental responsibility, thus perpetuating dynamics of

inequalities (Dyer, Humphries, Fitzgibbons, & Hurd, 2014; O’Neil, 2016; Zuboff, 1988, 2019). How to rethink research results and permeate them with concerns about their potential political impacts? How could scientific research integrate a clearer and more robust concern about the political impacts to their results?

Research in the area of management can contribute to a better understanding of how the impacts of its results will be negative and/or positive for organizations, humans, communities, animals, sociability, nature, actions, knowledge, etc. The results can even help to identify and reflect on unethical practices, criminal behavior and the supposed pure aura of some organizational theories. This is what the movement called critical studies in management stimulates: the production of knowledge from critical reflections and questioning of absolute truths (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000; Alvesson, Bridgman, & Willmott, 2009; Alvesson, & Sköldberg, 2000; Davel & Alcadipani, 2003) in a way that may reflect local (Abdalla & Faria, 2017) and native dynamics. Indeed, the generation of knowledge about organizations and management that takes local and native problems as references and recognizes the political dimension of epistemology (Misoczky & Camara, 2020) becomes essential to stimulate critical and emancipatory reflection on the impacts of academic research.

Educational impact of academic research

Power, politics and influence have long been researched themes in the field of management (e. g. Clegg, 1975, 1979; Clegg, & Palmer, 1996; Clegg, Courpasson, & Phillips, 2006; Faria, 2007, 2017; Fleming & Spicer, 2014; Frost, 1987; Goss, Jones, Betta, & Latham, 2011; Hardy, 1995; Hardy & Clegg, 2006; Jermier, Knights, & Nord, 1994; McKinlay & Starkey, 1998; Mumby, 1988; Townley, 1993), reviewing the more direct or subterranean, structural or procedural dimensions in the practices of managers, leaders, entrepreneurs and professionals in organizations. These themes constitute the main concerns and motivations of critical management studies (e. g. Adler, 2002, 2007; Adler, Forbes, & Willmott, 2007; Alvesson, 2011; Alvesson & Willmott, 1992, 2003; Alvesson et al., 2009; Davel & Alcadipani, 2003; Fournier & Grey, 2000; Maranhão & Vilela, 2017; Paes de Paula, 2007; Smircich & Calàs, 1995), which have already produced academic knowledge that helps guide research in methodological (e. g. Alvesson & Ashcraft, 2009; Alvesson & Deetz, 2000; Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000); and educational terms (e. g. Abdala & Faria, 2017; Grey, 1996, 2004; Misoczky & Camara, 2020). Even with all this abundant academic production, how can we better understand the political impact of academic research? How to measure such impact? Impact – often understood as changes arising from the results generated in academic research – presents challenges and problems to be assessed, such as measuring devices and methods. How can we ensure that these results were the most significant causes of the changes generated (Reale et al., 2018)? When considering political impact, such assessment is not made with metrics.

To think about how researchers can stimulate concern about the political impact of their research, we can think of at least three broad types of impact. The first type refers to impact as promoting emancipation and critical thinking. Research results can contribute to develop people’s critical thinking and promote progressive levels of emancipation. Researchers and subjects challenge truths rooted in existing organizational structures and ways of thinking, leading to fundamental policy changes that can improve local relationships and conditions.

This type of impact can easily come from studies that encourage participants to become aware of their reality and their ability to transform it, to make a difference in their contexts. Critical thinking is important to people's lives, so it must be stimulated and strengthened by permanent reflective exercises. Specific groups, such as women, workers, community members and researchers, find themselves able to make decisions based on experiments, as thinking critically implies joining knowledge and willingness to act based on reflection; research can thus improve the breaking of prejudices and stereotypes instead of reinforcing them, in addition to foster knowledge in which human differences are not only recognized, but also understood and valued.

The second type of impact is to provoke debate about the public interest. Research results can foster debates on subjects hitherto not perceived as problematic in relation to the collective interest. By disseminating their research beyond the academic audience, researchers work to explain that scientific production is part of a broader political project. This concern with feeding collective, academic and extra-academic debate reveals the political impacts that a research result can cause. In addition to rethinking the dissemination of results, researchers must "listen" to the public and expand the forms of social participation, since research subjects are also interested in applying the results. Research projects that consider the deep and fruitful relationship between scientific knowledge and society can fully consider and reveal the web of power relations, disputes, resistances and negotiations that involve academic research.

The third type of impact refers to the contribution that research results offer to the process of denaturalizing knowledge considered as neutral. Denaturalizing can be understood as a continuous process of finding strange what is known and putting oneself in suspension for reflective practice, interrogation and questioning, thus reorganizing what is known. Organizations are built as places of rationality, however, they are non-neutral spaces in the re-de-construction of identities, symbols, discourses, places and models. Research results that confront, question and find strange models and knowledge can assign visibility to issues and understandings that until then were perceived as normal, natural and neutral. The research and its results must be understood as a political act. If research tends to legitimize models, conceptions and tools, then which models, conceptions and tools does the researcher want to legitimize? Who benefits from this legitimation?

Political impacts are substantive and go beyond linear and objective metrics. They are also enhanced both during and after the research process. That is, these impacts are enhanced not only in the results, but also in the way researchers perform their research activities, in the interactions with the empirical field of research and in the way public policy makers communicate their decisions (Reale et al., 2018). This means that researchers must be concerned with promoting the participation of all people and organizations involved in research with the assessment of its most diverse types of impact.

The political impacts of academic research represent the future of the development of societies and organizations, as they make life viable in a collective, social and democratic context. If so, why are we still unable to substantiate, enable and operationalize its consideration in our scientific research metrics and guidelines?

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