



*International Food and Agribusiness Management Review*  
*Volume 14, Issue 2, 2011*

## **The Nature of Agribusiness Management Research**

### **Executive Commentary**

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#### **Abstract**

What do we do, when we do agribusiness management research? Who do we serve and how is it different than research in other management fields? What disciplines influence our work? Is there a unique body of agribusiness theory? In an attempt to answer these questions I conducted a very pedestrian exploratory study.

**Keywords:** agribusiness, management, research

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## **Introduction**

After 20 years of a fruitful IFAMA membership, and academic work, a couple of questions keep catching my attention. What do we do, when we do Agribusiness Management (AgB Mgmt) Research? Who do we serve? How is it different than research in other management fields? What disciplines influence our work? Is there a unique body of agribusiness theory? In an attempt to answer these questions I conducted a very pedestrian exploratory study. I first looked at all the titles of the work presented at symposiums and published in the IFAMR during the last 20 years. Then I analyzed all the articles published in 1998 and 2007. I used those years because 1998 was the first one available online and 2007 was the last one available while exploring the question. I checked that the titles of those two years were not at odds with the norm at both ends of the decade. My understanding of the work published in the general management literature comes from four years of readings (2007-2010) for my doctoral thesis titled “Organizing science based innovation”.

Exercises of self-criticism are frequent in the fields of management and strategy, as they are deemed healthy for the progress of an academic field. Self-reflection helps to identify one’s field unique contribution and provide a sense of identity for its community. Recently, members of the relatively new strategic management field have voiced a range of somehow divergent concerns about the direction of their work, such as lack of paradigmatic development, premature paradigmatic convergence, moving away from its eclectic and pluralistic origins, lack of adequate testing and replication to consolidate knowledge, and distancing from the ‘integrative capstone’ nature of strategy teaching. The fact that one such self-reflective studies was awarded with the Academy of Management Best Conference Paper in 2004 is an indication of the importance that the Academy of Management places in these types of discussions.

## **Problems**

How do our problems compare with those of other management fields? Where do problems come from in science is a highly contentious question. In the more fundamental and mature sciences, research problems emerge from the community of scientists itself as mature sciences work mostly in a ‘normal science’ mode. In the less mature sciences, as in the social sciences, most questions and problems emerge from the environment and from society itself – how do we cure cancer? How do we feed a growing population? Applied fields such as management in general and agribusiness management are performance oriented. The field of management emerged as a result of the need to coordinate work in increasingly complex organizations and corporations. The strategic management field emerged as result of increasing corporate competition.

In agribusiness our problems originate from society’s needs. In 1957 Goldberg and Davies stated that the overall mission of agribusiness as a profession was to ...” inform private and public policy and strategic decision making with the ultimate purpose of providing food in an efficient, nutritionally acceptable, and socially desirable manner.” For Goldberg, the research problems of interest were related to understanding and informing how agents – private and public – could advance their strategic position and how such moves could affect performance at the various levels–agency (firm), value chain, industry, commodity system, and the wider food system.

Sonka and Hudson argued that the uniqueness of agribusiness management challenges were due to (1) the unique cultural, institutional, and political aspects of food, domestically and internationally; (2) the uncertainty arising from the underlying biological basis of crops and livestock production; (3) the alternative goals and forms of political intervention across subsectors and among nations in an increasingly global industry; (4) the institutional framework leading to significant portions of the technology development process being performed in the public sector; and (5) the variety of competitive structures existing within and among the subsectors of the food and agribusiness sector.

## **Variables of Interest**

In the management literature, managing is mostly about interventions at the level of the work environment. When they talk management they talk mostly about people at work and how it affects performance of groups and the organization. The independent variables of interest in the generic management literature are mostly factors and entities inside the firm – individuals, groups and their behavior, the organization, the work environment, culture, incentives, routines, governance (the board room), and leadership.

A look at our literature shows that although we do have an interest in the performance of the firm, we have a broader performance interest spanning beyond the boundaries of the firm. We have an interest in the value chain, the industry, the commodity system, and the food system. Our research shows that our independent variables of interest reside mostly outside the firm - markets, prices, technologies, consumer preferences, institutions (outside the firm), regulations, natural environment, industrial organizations. When we talk about agribusiness management we mean managing the resources in general and managing the organization – the firm, the value chain- with respect to the environment. When we talk management we mean interventions at various levels–the firm, the value chain, market institutions (governance), policies and regulations.

## **Theories**

What are the theories that inform research in the general field of management and how do they compare with agribusiness management? Management research is informed by disciplines such as sociology, psychology and social psychology. The field of strategic management was built around disciplines such as organization theory, industrial organization, organizational economics, institutional economics and agency theory. As fields of study become more applied or solution driven, they tend to make use of a broader base of supporting disciplines; they somehow become more eclectic. Vigorous epistemological debates are frequent in the management sciences, with one camp arguing for paradigmatic convergence and theoretical consolidation and another for theoretical eclecticism and diversity of scholarly work.

Agribusiness management research draws on a wide range of disciplines, which is consistent with the applied nature of the field and the diversity of levels of analysis and problems that are of interest to the profession. Goldberg's Agribusiness Commodity System approach is an example of the multidisciplinary nature of the profession. For him, no problem at any functional level of

the value added food and fiber chain could be understood, evaluated, researched, or acted upon without looking at the total agribusiness system. A complementary view of the multi-theoretical nature of the problems that our profession is required to address was offered by Cook and Chaddad who explained about the diversity of theories required for getting all the levels of the agri-food system right. They concluded that the competence and governance literature underpin agribusiness management research.

## **Methods**

How do our research methods compare to research in general management? The choice of methods of enquiry depends of course on the nature of the problem, but also depends on how well a problem can be defined in terms of extant theory. In the mature sciences, because research problems emerge from inside the science itself, hypotheses are well grounded on accepted theories, and the methods are mostly aimed at testing hypotheses in quantitative terms. A more frequent use of exploratory and qualitative methods is observed in the less mature social and applied fields, due to the complexity and dynamics of the phenomena of interest. It has been recognized though, that problems coming to science vary in terms of equivocality. Some problems fall in the domain of the knowable (normal science) other in more complex and more uncertain domains. While the natural fundamental sciences may ignore problems coming from society as non-scientific or not amenable to their science, the more applied sciences may not have that luxury. A look at the general management literature shows that they are making increasing use of qualitative methods, longitudinal studies, case study research, due to their interest in understanding complex processes of change. Surprisingly, a look at the sources of citations in our literature shows that there are almost no references to the mainstream management journals and very little to the strategic management literature. Our path dependency in terms of research approaches from agriculture economics is very much evident from the journals cited in our work. Hypothetico-deductive approaches and quantitative methods are still very much the norm.

## **Summary and Implications**

The similarities with the generic management field are 1) we share an interest in the performance of organizations; 2) we aim to inform managerial action 3) we share some of the disciplines underpinning our research with the economics strand of the strategic management literature. The differences are (1) we define the boundaries of organizational interest more broadly (2) accordingly, our interest in performance as main dependent variable of interest extends beyond the boundaries of the firm; (3) our independent variables of interest reside mostly outside the firm (4) the disciplines underpinning our work are different than in the general management research, (5) we make less use of qualitative methods to explore complex and dynamic socially embedded processes.

The uniqueness of AgB management research is defined by the uniqueness of its context, by the diversity of agencies and levels of interest in the food system, and by the applied nature of the profession. Although context free research is perceived by some as more scientific and rigorous, both forms of enquiry serve different and useful goals to inform managerial action. The diversity of levels of analysis and the complexity of contexts require a diverse set of support theories and

methods of research. There are no reasons to believe that the AgB management profession would be better served by a theory pushed than by a problem pulled research agenda.

My review of the citations from those two selected years revealed a paucity of exploratory research, and of citations supporting the practice of exploratory research. The global dynamics of the agri-food and bionenergy system present many new and remarkable phenomena for study. Waiting for secondary or thick data sets to emerge may cause the academy to miss important researchable events. A need for scientifically rigorous exploratory research is required to open up new agribusiness management theoretical developments.

The implications for education are quite significant. Masters students should be familiar with a repertoire of analytical frameworks, emphasizing competence and governance, and be able to exercise those frameworks in diverse contextual settings. Intensive use of teaching case studies would serve this second requirement. AgB PhD education should be able to balance the tension between disciplinary focus and rigor as required by theory driven studies, and the skills required to tackle complex and context specific managerial research problems.

Management education, while fundamental for providing analytical frameworks and tools leaves practitioners with little understanding of the nexus and interdependency between the biology of production system, social science, engineering, and markets, which underlie the field of agribusiness. This reality not only justifies AgB education, but calls for a greater integration from the fields of business and agricultural colleges.

AgB management research is a heterogeneous research space ... it is our nature.

## **Acknowledgements**

Thanks to Peter Goldsmith for his encouragement and valuable comments.