Editorial

The Case Method in Business Economics Research: A Normative-Positive Approach or a Growing Methodological Awareness?

*Salvatore Esposito De Falco**

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The methodologies employed in management studies have not always proved fully adequate to capture the actual complexity of the firm as their object of inquiry. Indeed, the literature has documented a broad spectrum of research approaches, ranging from the analysis of individual business cases to normative accounts in which the firm has, in essence, been treated as an ahistorical entity.

An examination of international publication trends in management research reveals the progressive consolidation of two main methodological orientations. On the one hand, normative approaches seek to formulate principles, models, and recommendations for managerial action. On the other hand, positive approaches aim to describe, explain, and interpret corporate behaviour without necessarily translating their findings into operational prescriptions. Both perspectives have contributed significantly to the development of the discipline. However, when adopted in isolation, both risk failing to capture fully the concrete, historical, and context-dependent nature of the firm.

It is certainly not easy to establish whether a prescriptive approach should be considered preferable to a non-prescriptive one. By analogy, the issue recalls the relationship between biological and clinical knowledge in the medical sciences. The former provides general scientific foundations, whereas

* Full Professor of Business Management, Sapienza University of Rome. salvatore.espositodefalco@uniroma1.it ID ORCID: 0000-0002-8000-5455

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the latter applies such knowledge to the interpretation of the individual patient, as well as to diagnosis and treatment. Similarly, in management studies, theory provides categories, concepts, and models, but it is the engagement with the actual firm – with its history, actors, decisions, and constraints – that enables a comprehensive understanding of business phenomena.

Against this background, the author is convinced that case study research continues to represent one of the most valuable methodological approaches for advancing knowledge of the firm. The challenge, however, lies in overcoming the risk of excessive abstraction. The solution can only be found in research capable of acting as a bridge between the new problems emerging from managerial practice and the innovative models or principles developed by theory.

As previously observed, the stream of research devoted to specific business realities, centred on the analysis and interpretation of the decisions made by individual firms and rigorously connected to the environmental context in which they operate, plays a driving role in the advancement of business economics (Napolitano, 1994).

Rather than relying exclusively on general laws or seeking regularities through the application of indicators and statistical correlations, the business scholar may focus on the uniqueness of the individual firm. Such an approach provides not only a basis for testing or challenging theoretical propositions, but, above all, an experimental setting in which weak signals can be identified and new methodological proposals can emerge.

From this perspective, we believe that this is the path that should be pursued. This does not imply abandoning other research approaches, which may remain valid and valuable. Nevertheless, no methodological approach can ultimately dispense with engagement with the concrete realities continuously generated by the economic and business world.

Ethnographic research, in particular, may represent a particularly promising frontier for business economics and management studies. Originating within anthropology and subsequently embraced by the social and organizational sciences, ethnography enables researchers to examine organizational practices, languages, symbols, routines, and decision-making processes from within.

Rather than merely collecting data through standardized instruments, the researcher enters the organizational setting, observes its everyday dynamics, interprets the meanings that organizational actors attribute to their actions, and reconstructs the implicit culture that shapes behaviours and decisions. In this respect, ethnography can enrich the case study method by providing an in-depth understanding of managerial phenomena and of the processes through which firms construct value, identity, and legitimacy.

Building on these necessary premises, I decided to launch the present Special Issue. The contributions included in this collection provide insightful analyses of diverse organizational, entrepreneurial, and institutional settings. Despite their differences, they share a common ambition: to develop an in-depth understanding of complex phenomena, decision-making processes, managerial practices, and pathways of change that cannot easily be reduced to linear relationships or investigated solely through quantitative data.

In conclusion, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the three Guest Editors who curated and coordinated this Special Issue and, above all, to all the authors who responded to the call for papers and entrusted the journal with the results of their research. The quality, variety, and number of the submissions received made this editorial project possible and confirm the importance of continuing to promote scholarly spaces that are open to theoretical and methodological pluralism.

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