The ongoing monitoring of societal responsibility in management research activities A secondary analysis and a heuristic instrumentation

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Abstract:

Purpose - This article highlights the need to explore the concept of social responsibility at the very heart of research activity. Questioning the social responsibility of research activities in management provides the opportunity to take a fresh look at the criteria used to assess its usefulness.

Design/methodology/approach - Drawing on a secondary analysis of a longitudinal research process, this paper emphasizes the importance of achieving an ongoing co-monitoring of the issues about social responsibility involved in research.

Findings- This reflection leads to a first characterization of two key dimensions of the societal responsibility of researchers in management: their professional responsibility and their institutional responsibility.

Research limitations/implications - It is meant to encourage researchers to design a relevant instrumentation to help them negotiate, make explicit and co-monitor the issues of social responsibility involved in their empirical investigations as well as in their theoretical elaborations.

Social implications - As research projects are socially situated activities, always infused with values and ideologies, it is crucial that researchers reflect upon the axiology guiding their empirical and theoretical work.

Originality/value – In order to achieve an ongoing co-monitoring of the issues about social responsibility involved in management research, the article suggests a heuristic deviated use of the balanced scorecard.

Keywords: Social responsibility - Research Activity - Research intervention - Balanced Scorecard

Article type : Conceptual paper

Introduction

In a praxeological sense[1] management sciences contribute to making the managerial practices they analyze more efficient, effective and insightful. The activity of the researcher in management sciences is far too often portrayed as a solitary activity (Avenier and Schmitt 2007), despite the fact that more and more management research is carried out within a contractual framework, whether that be as a research-intervention within a particular organization or a response to a call for projects by the National Research Agency through which government bodies proactively prioritise the research topics. Thus, in a context where research projects do not emerge purely from a strict scientific rationale specific to the discipline, but meet at the juncture of political and social issues, the question of societal responsibility within management research activity is an important issue, not only from the public policy standpoint, but also in terms of the scientific discipline itself (Royer 2011). In fact, although many researchers in management sciences describe, analyze and demonstrate the importance for companies to implement « responsible » practices, few question the need to implement these same principles within their own professional activity...

This paper proposes an initial exploration of the following question: How can we characterise the societal responsibility of researchers in management sciences? If each research project is specific (according to its epistemological, methodological and theoretical affiliation), work carried out in management sciences cannot avoid the responsibility for the changes that their models and experiments bring about, not only within companies and organizations, but also beyond the company boundaries (Delacour et al. 2011). Therefore, the researcher must be aware of the consequences that his work is likely to have for the company.

Our argument is structured in three parts. The first returns to the idea of responsibility in order to specify its characteristics, particularly when described as « societal ». The second part presents a secondary analysis of a research process with the aim of exploring the consequences a researcher's work has for a company. Finally, the last part defines the concept of social responsibility for a researcher in management sciences by identifying two types of responsibility: professional and institutional.

I. <u>The responsibility of the researcher in management sciences: a multi-faceted responsibility</u>

This first section proposes a definition of the researcher's responsibility applied specifically to the activity of the researcher in management sciences. This transition enables us to highlight two levels of responsibility for the researcher in management: the first refers to his scientific responsibility, the second stresses the societal responsibility of his activity.

1.1 What should be the definition of a researcher's responsibility?

According to the dictionary (Robert 1964), a researcher's responsibility is seen to be « *the moral and intellectual obligation or necessity [he has] to carry out his work in full awareness that the way in which he works - both theoretically and practically – will carry consequences, and in accepting being named as the author, the willful cause of these consequences* » (quote by Schlemmer 1998, p. 229). This definition applies to the activities of management researchers who study organizations and their managerial practices. In fact, rather than

denying that which justifies its value, management research activity in a praxeological sense should at the very least take a share of the responsibility for the procedures observed within organizations since the research results contribute directly to transforming the company, its projects, its innovation processes, its control procedures, its tools, etc.

The responsibility of the researcher in management therefore is in full play at the very heart of the two aspects that characterize his research work: both in the choices he makes to advance his project of knowledge and in the manner in which he communicates the contribution provided by his work to members of the company being studied, and to the scientific community to which he belongs. The responsibility of the researcher in management must therefore be analyzed on two levels: individual and collective.

1.2 *Scientific responsibility*

Individual responsibility has been addressed extensively through the concept of reflexivity. Indeed, the value of reflexivity within research activities has been emphasized repeatedly (Schön, 1983 and 1987; Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000; Yanow and Tsoukas, 2009) because, just like the practitioner, the researcher must be capable of analyzing the impact of his own activity on the organization he is observing. Reflexivity is an essential dynamic in mastering the progress of a research activity and has three dimensions (de La Ville, 2003):

Operational reflexivity: this reflexivity refers to the way in which the researcher uses his skills (apparent and inherent) to do his job as a researcher. These skills are too often disregarded in research reports and yet they have a decisive influence on the quality of the exchanges established with the different actors in the organization. If Schön (1983) defines reflexivity as a reflection of the actions already accomplished by the manager or researcher, Yanow and Tsoukas (2009) emphasize the importance of developing a phenomenological approach to reflexivity that can incorporate the prior activity as well as guiding the ongoing activity of the researchers. Indeed, some unusual situations have called upon the improvisational skills of the researcher where the implementation reveals the ethical choices that the latter made « in vivo » in order to advance his work.

Conceptual reflexivity: the researcher's work should not be limited to promoting a set of management practices developed by an organization in a given context. In order to surpass situated events, the management researcher, during his activity, must structure and organize his analytical work according to the themes under discussion within his affiliated discipline. Thus, for example, the selection of significant elements, the definition of categories for analysis, the choice of an architecture in which to develop a piece of work all emphasise the need for the researcher to make a certain number of controlled moves. By allowing the creation of categories, concepts and classifications, these moves lead to an enrichment of knowledge by reorganizing the experiences of the players in the field and result in a new command of the real situation, as much for the researcher as for the actors in the organization (Goody, 1979).

Scriptural reflexivity: through his commitment to the writing process, the researcher no longer merely describes the organization: he contributes directly to its evolution. As Morin recalls: « *Responsibility begins with the decision to be an author in what we describe as our world* » (quote by Besnier 2008, p.161). Management research activity then can be analyzed as a scriptural game: « *The scriptural game, the production of a system, opportunity realm for*

formalisation, means returning to the reality from which it was differenciated in order to change it » (Certeau (de) 1990, p. 200). This level of reflexivity assumes the researcher can clarify the assumptions on which his writing project is based and which progressively crystallize as the interpretation progresses. Thus, the real scope of the modeling can be assessed when the researcher masters the underpinnings of the transformative perspective it opens in order to change the organization.

These three dimensions of reflexivity emerge during the course of the researcher's everyday activities and indicate the need for him to investigate many diverse ethical issues. This reflexivity is « disciplining »[2] by nature: the researcher has to record the results of his work within the context of current debates within the scientific community to which he belongs. Indeed, if reflexivity claims to create « actionable knowledge » (Argyris 2008), which is teachable and useable in practice by managers (Le Moigne 1995), researchers in management sciences cannot avoid the question of their commitment, which goes beyond their own scientific community, to open up to society in its widest sense.

1.3 Societal responsibility

Considering the societal responsibility of the researcher enables us to record and describe the relationships that exist between the management researcher's activity and the different components of the company. We associate the term « societal » to that of social in its broadest sense[3], as Capron and Quairel suggest « *common usage tends more and more to include the term social (in the context of CSR) in its original meaning derived from the Anglo-American which encompasses societal aspects* ». (2010, p. 27). The researcher's responsibility widens beyond the scientific sphere and its nature changes: it becomes « social » insofar as the researcher has not only to incorporate the social expectations at the heart of his everyday activities but also be able to identify the societal consequences of his activity.

In fact, management researchers are asked increasingly to disseminate knowledge to an ever-wider audience: research participants, the academic community, the media, NGOs, policy makers and society at large (Royer 2011). This is why taking into consideration the societal responsibility of research activity should lead to developing the means for a dialogue with the various interested parties of the management researcher's work: « *more should be done to educate scientists in dialogue with the public and the media. This activity should be incorporated into careers, and here we have a long way to go* » (Alix 2009, p.48).

This type of question has already been widely discussed by the sociology of sciences that critically analyzes the relationships that exist between science, citizenship and public policy (Weber 1959[4], Latour 1989 and 2001). The difficulties encountered by researchers in establishing a dialogue with non-specialist stakeholders, that is those outside of their affiliated discipline, have been highlighted in numerous studies (Crettaz von Rotten and Moeschlmer 2008). Researchers in social sciences are expected to respond to requests for public involvement to help identify the conditions for applying certain scientific discoveries that present potential risks (Irwin 1995). Thus, if they are absolutely necessary to guarantee a transparent scientific debate, the scrupulous implementation of codes of conduct and ethics or the re-editing operations concerning third parties, are only a first step in the consideration of research issues for the company.

The issue of a researcher's social responsibility should require him to question his ability to adopt innovative behaviour that aims to place the company at the centre of his activity. The

researcher should be open to dialogue with stakeholders as, in order to be able to argue and claim how useful he is to the company, his own scientific project will inevitably be confronted by numerous projects, scales of value and ideologies (Le Menestrel and Van Wassenhove, 2009). New debates about the links between researchers and companies crystallize around issues of communication, participatory government and citizen involvement, in order to control the irreversibility established by the socio-technical developments produced through research (Irwin 2010).

As the societal responsibility of a researcher gradually builds through interaction with the institutional context and the various research partners (Béji-Bécheur et al., 2011), it seemed important to identify which management tool might help the management researcher to monitor such issues ... For, as Hatchuel reminds us: *« defining a responsibility without providing the cognitive instruments that allow us to build and appreciate it, means taking away any possibility for it to exist ... »* (2012, p. 169). In fact, as Pesqueux (2011) noted, social responsibility gives rise to a double movement: the consideration of stakeholders and the integration of this concept at the very heart of management practices. The instrumentation proposal outlined in the following section attempts to take up this double challenge.

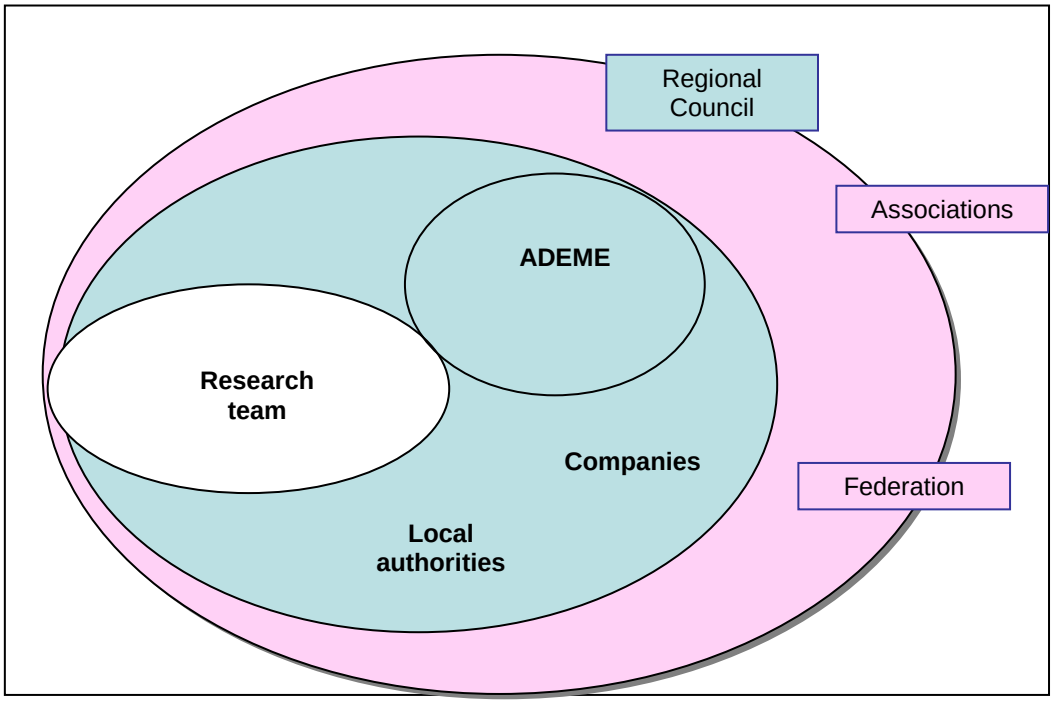
II. Ideas for a heuristic instrumentation for monitoring the social responsibility issues of research in management sciences

To progress with this question we will first use a secondary analysis and then a research intervention. Our secondary analysis[5] seeks to reinterpret the difficulties related to conducting research and is based on the model « research design and methodological advancement » highlighted by Corti (2007, p. 42-45). The choice to revisit a research intervention relates to the very characteristics of that methodology that makes the researcher confront directly the different stakeholders of the company: partner organizations, stakeholders, customers, NGOs, political institutions, etc. (Pichault et al. 2009). The purpose of the secondary analysis is to examine the conditions that facilitate the establishment of a systematic dialogue with the various interested parties of the research so as to enable an ongoing co-monitoring of the different dimensions of societal responsibility likely to emerge during the course of the research.

2.1 Presentation of the principle characteristics of the research

This research was carried out with the Environment and Energy Management Agency (ADEME). The objective was to produce for local authorities a costing device to manage the financial excesses of the public waste disposal service. To create this instrumentation, the Agency decided to involve all the actors interested in this issue and invited local authorities to become actively involved in the project, as well as associations, regional councils, a business federation and researchers (see Diagram n° 1).

Diagram n°1 – The actors in the project



This research study (Jönsson and Lukka 2007, David 2002) began with an audit of six local authorities in order to understand the specifics of the management of this public service, and also the needs of officials with regard to instrumenting its management. The process of constructing the device to measure the cost of waste took two years in close interaction with five communities. During this period, the researcher actively participated in the device's creation: the administration of a questionnaire (233 questionnaires sent to local authorities that managed a public waste disposal service), conducting semi-directive interviews (30 hours of interviews), the formalization of various processes (such as that of waste disposal), participation in working-group meetings (once a month during the creation process) and steering committee meetings (every two months).

This research intervention did not run smoothly with misunderstandings between the various parties involved in the development and diffusion of the device. Our secondary analysis enables us to illustrate this point. For example, debates developed regarding:

> *The role of the researcher*: Members of the ADEME progressively insisted that the researcher should increasingly deal with the technical aspects relating to the creation of the device, which directly called into question his role in the project because when the contract was signed, it was clearly stated that the research should focus on the mechanisms to enable the community to appropriate the device. This unethical deflection slowed the progress of the work because the researcher had once again to explain and even negotiate his role so as not to move away from the initial requirement expressed in the contract.
>
> *The involvement of the local authorities*: Another difficulty arose when the authorities involved in the implementation of the device blocked the project driven by the ADEME. The authorities wishing to develop a device to control their activity did not understand the benefits of the monitoring device being created by and for the Agency.

It was only after several months that the members of the ADEME understood the significance of this blockage which nearly sabotaged the whole project...

The agreements necessary for the operation of the device: When the choice of device was finally agreed upon by the members of the Agency and the authorities, difficulties emerged regarding the social and technical agreements required to allocate the costs. For example, how to define the waste collection activity? How to formalise the process of waste disposal? Or, from a more technical point of view, the issue of qualifying the costs generated crucial questions: were they direct or indirect? How could they be allocated to the activities? ...

Though this list is by no means exhaustive, the review of these various difficulties, led us to question afterwards how one could establish a meaningful dialogue in order to monitor the issues of societal responsibility of research. What tool could enable us to foresee certain problems and help to promote discussion between the stakeholders involved in the research project? We believe that the joint development of a *Balanced Scorecard* (BSC) could potentially be a way of initiating this dialogue with the various stakeholders in research.

2.2 Conceiving a management tool to help clarify a researcher's social responsibility

The *Balanced Scorecard* (Kaplan and Norton 1996 a and b, 2001, 2006, 2007), a scoring system regularly used to carry out strategic monitoring of an organisation's activities, would appear to be a particularly appropriate tool to address the concept of a researcher's responsibility with regard to company stakeholders. Indeed, using this tool, many researchers have demonstrated its usefulness in exploring and mastering the issues related to corporate societal responsibility (Johnson 1998, and Bieker Gminder 2001, Figge et al, 2002, Zingales and Hockerts 2003). However, the benefit of adapting this system for research activity is not in measuring and monitoring a researcher's performance, but rather in gaining a more comprehensive appreciation of the complex functions that can be assigned to a research activity. Therefore, rather than simply implementing the tool its use should be « deviated »: with this modification the *Balanced Scorecard* becomes a « mediating artifact », a medium for initiating discussion on the social issues of research activity. From this observation, score indicators may be defined using the four axes of the BSC:

- *Client satisfaction axis*: This axis allows us to understand the medium and long-term consequences of the project for its principal stakeholders. This measure refers to how useful the device is for communities: the societal responsibility of the actors in the project here consists of constructing a device that is accepted and actually used by the members of the communities (*Number of local communities using the device*). It also helps to expand the evaluation of the impact of research activity on society (*Number of organizations, institutions, associations participating in the steering committee*).

- *Shareholder satisfaction axis*: As the research is funded entirely by two organizations (the University and the ADEME), the researcher should be able to explain the costs incurred in relation to the objectives that were assigned to him (*Use of financial resources provided by the ADEME and the University*). However, this justification should not lead the researcher to take into account only the needs of his financial backers and avoid questioning how the practices of different stakeholders might be affected by their participation in the research process (*Research results presented in*

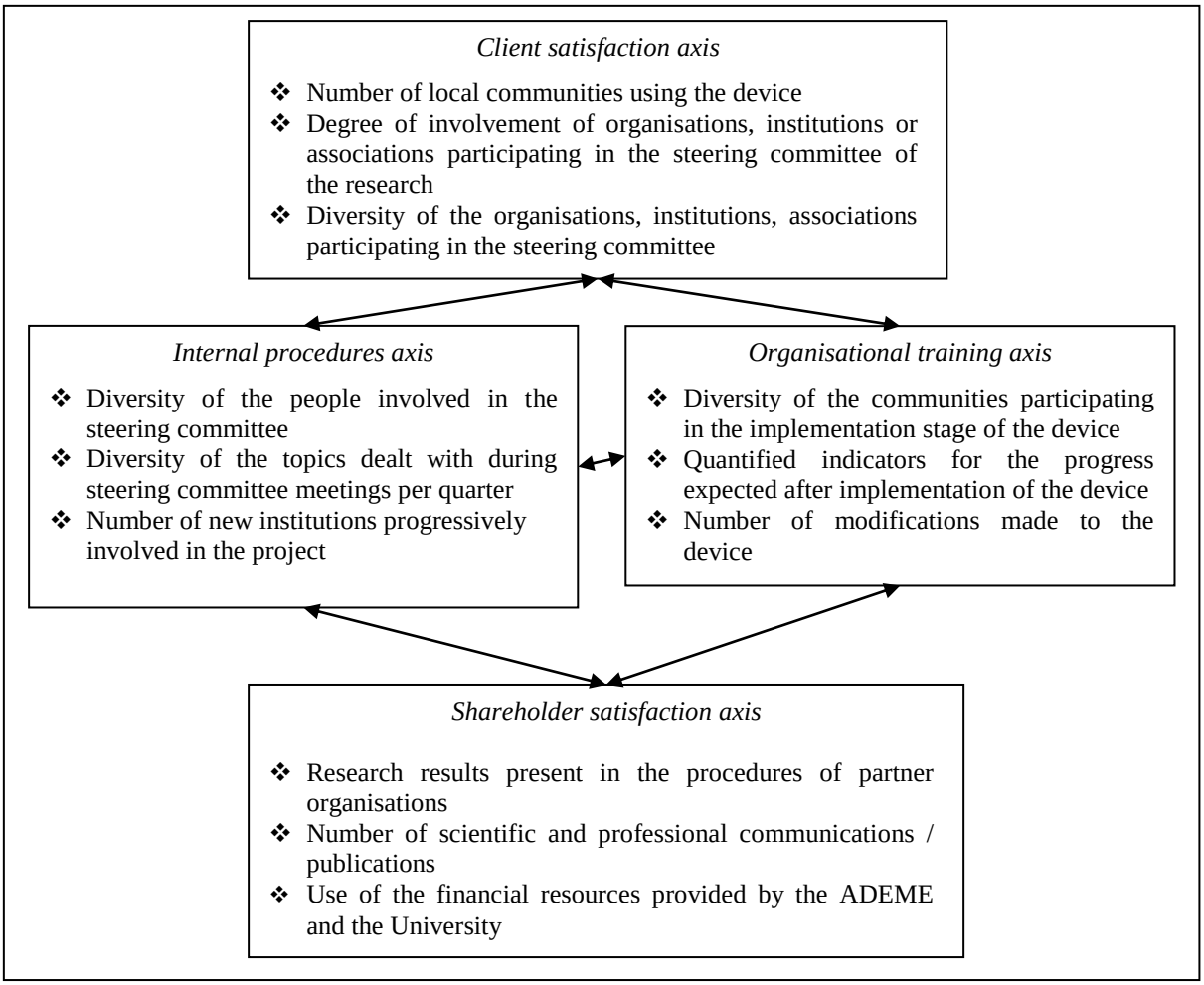
the documents of partner organizations). This axis also includes communication about the project made within the scientific and professional communities (*Number of scientific and professional publications*).

- *Internal procedures axis*: This axis describes the main features of the research that are generating the production of valid scientific knowledge (*Number of steering committee meetings per quarter*). However, the researcher must also be sure to include all of the stakeholders in the monitoring methods of the research (*Number of new institutions involved in the project*). In order to debate the conditions for appropriation of the research results, members of the Agency, local authorities, associations and researchers could discuss the research results (interim study reports, model proposals).

- *Organizational training axis*: This axis highlights the researcher's ability to adapt and react to his research topic. Within the project, this ability could be measured by the number of communities who join the project during the construction process of the device (*Number of communities participating in the process*), by the degree of involvement of each of the communities in the project (*Number of communities having recently implemented the device*) or even by the number of transformations made to the device (*Number of changes observed in the device*).

If this deviated use of the BSC might be likely to contribute to the emergence and ongoing monitoring of certain societal responsibility issues of management science research activity, it constitutes only a first and very imperfect step forward. For this deviation cannot escape the traditional criticisms of the BSC: the difficulty in selecting score indicators (which would not be objective nor free of the power struggles in the dialogue between stakeholders), the effective impossibility of putting into operation some of the score indicators, or even the subtle combination of certain indicators (an association that could ultimately promote research with conflicting objectives). Nevertheless, reconsidering the difficulties that may be encountered during a research intervention allows us to suggest that the construction of a BSC could help to avoid some of the misunderstandings, prevarications, surreptitious dilutions or conflicts that may arise during the course of the research.

Diagram n° 2 – Proposal for a BSC formulation



In summary, diagram n° 2 takes up the four axes of the scoring system in order to propose a model for a BSC adapted to the research project developed with the ADEME. The deviation from the Kaplan and Norton model can be used to address very effectively certain aspects of the responsibility of research activity vis-à-vis company stakeholders. This tool could also support a thorough and systematic dialogue with stakeholders in order to involve them in a co-monitoring of the societal responsibility issues of the research project, which cannot be unilaterally defined by only the researcher but which are always the result of a situated and provisional compromise... intended in practice to move the research project forward.

III. Discussion – Besides its instrumentation, the societal responsibility of research poses two new questions…

This attempt at an « instrumentation » enables us to characterise the concept of a researcher's societal responsibility as a combination of two dimensions: a professional and an institutional responsibility (see Table n° 1). Thus, besides a proposal to instrument the ongoing monitoring of the societal responsibility of the research, this third section provides a more general view of these two dimensions of responsibility for researchers in management sciences.

Table n°1 – The double dimension of societal responsibility

	Professional responsibility	Institutional responsibility
Client satisfaction axis	The degree of involvement of organisations, institutions or associations participating in the steering committee of the research.	The diversity of the organisations, institutions or associations participating in the steering committee. The number of local communities using the device.
Shareholder satisfaction axis	Results of the research present in the procedures of the partner organisations. Number of communication about the results of the research in academic and professional seminars.	Use of the financial resources provided by the ADEME and the University. Number of publications of the research results in academic and professional journals.
Internal procedures axis	Diversity of the topics covered each quarter by the steering committees. Diversity of the people involved in the steering committees.	Number of new institutions involved in the project
Organisational training axis	Diversity of the local authorities participating in the implantation of the device. Statistical measures of the objective of progress associated with the implementation of the device.	Number of communities having recently installed the device. Number of changes made to the device.

Professional responsibility

At the heart of his work, the researcher in management sciences is obliged to clarify his role in controlling his social experiments and the conditions for reproducing his scientific progress to produce actionable knowledge of the subject being researched. According to Bernard Schlemmer, « *It is remarkable to note that the issue of a researcher's obligations is so rarely put forward for group discussion; everything takes place as if the issue did not exist or was seen strictly as an individual choice, as if the given response did not have any effect on our actual professional approach* » (1998, p. 242). In fact, the researcher does not work in a social vacuum: he builds on work already recognised, through cooperation networks and through his declared affiliation to a school of thought and participates in power games between institutions that fund and justify research work. No research can claim to be responsible if it does not enforce the recommendations made by the supervisory bodies on which it depends: for example, the protocols to be applied in animal experimentation or in the use of personal data collected during research work. The researcher must therefore be aware of whether his work is in accordance with his respective scientific community and how his results might transform the methods of governing research and also transform the knowledge of citizens in everyday life. However, beyond these aspects relating to his practice, the very fact that he is a member of a profession whose independence is guaranteed by the French constitution, the researcher is morally bound to report on his research activities to the State, his employer, and also to the whole of society. The rules laid down by the professional community to which he is affiliated, allow the researcher to achieve a detached but cooperative relationship with political spheres, whether they be private or public. Edgar Morin reminds us that the scientific experience has always had an ambivalent relationship with technology and also with the political sphere, and rues the fact that: « *Only a minority of scientists have perceived this link, in particular those who have grouped themselves under the Universal Movement for Scientific Responsibility (MURS)*[6] *(...)* » (2004, p. 75). Thus, we are joined in a so-called « European » perspective in an attempt to incorporate societal responsibility within the principles that guide the activity of researchers (Pesqueux, 2006).

Institutional responsibility

Can the management researcher ignore the fact that business practices in general outpace the rules of law, which today enables certain transnational corporations to act with impunity in the absence of an international criminal law that remains to be devised and implemented? (Bourdon 2010). The Grenelle Environment Forum, the Bioethics Committees, the debates organized by the OECD and the commissions set up by the European Union to organize the public debate on controversial scientific advances, are many examples where the societal responsibility of research activity is in play. Through the new knowledge that it brings, the societal responsibility of research activity is likely to lead to changes in the fundamental concepts of law and policy that aim to control certain societal risks. Thus, laws, regulations, benchmarks can be imposed on organizations as a result of research that is keen to participate in democratic debate and demonstrate its usefulness to society. For example, Delacour et al. (2011) point out how the institutional environment of researchers in finance influences the orientation of their work and favours a situation of saturation. Research advances challenge the fundamental schools of thought and systems of values on which the organization of society is based at a given time. External aspects induced by entrepreneurial activity and the actual market function (CO2 emissions and pollution, depletion of natural resources, changes in dietary habits contributing to an obesity pandemic, nanotechnology, etc.) lead to a review of the concept of wealth created by business and challenge the maximization of value created for shareholders at the expense of other stakeholders, such as government, public health insurance or pension contributions systems, etc. Edgar Morin stresses that « *in these conditions it is clear that the time when value judgments do not interfere with scientific activity is over* » (Morin 2004, p. 75). Management researchers are morally bound to take part in the inter-institutional adjustments between scientific, legal and political bodies that guide the purpose and the activity of business in contemporary society. Research activity can therefore explicitly claim a progressive and committed dimension, being fully aware that exploring facts from an innovative angle, its results will be likely to challenge certain conceptual boundaries, transform certain inter-institutional power struggles, and lead to the establishment of new regulatory frameworks...

Conclusion

If the activity of research in management sciences claims any social usefulness, it is that it professes to transform business practices to make them more lucid, more effective and more efficient, that is to say, sustainable and socially responsible. Re-examining a research project from this particular perspective enabled us to propose a possible instrumentation – from a virtualisation approach[7] – likely to enable all the stakeholders in research to participate in the development of indicators that contribute to the clarification of a sufficiently shared axiology to guide the advancement of the knowledge project. Nevertheless, we wish to emphasize that the value of this formulation attempt is not to propose universal measure indicators but to focus more on the work they generate: the possibility of inviting - and initiating - a renewal of research practices by integrating quite explicitly the societal responsibility issues at the very heart of research activity. In addition, the indicators selected in the context of the dialogue with stakeholders for the joint development of a BSC constitute a tool that enables us to cope with the surprises that inevitably arise during the course of a research project. Indeed, as each research project is unique because of the configuration of the partners involved, the

monitoring assumes creatively imagining and implementing the indicators of social responsibility issues that characterize and justify it. The fact remains that the relevance of the approach we have outlined can only be verified in practice by testing the effect of developing a BSC on the quality of the dialogue with stakeholders during the set up and progress of a new research project.

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[1] Leguérinel L., 2009, *Enjeux et limites des théories contemporaines de l'action. De la praxéologie à la pragmatique*, Paris, L'Harmattan.
[2] In the Foucault sense… Foucault M. (1975), *Surveiller et punir*. Gallimard, Paris.
[3] The meaning of the word « social » is often restrictive in only incorporating the relationships between employees and employers.
[4] As early as 1919, Max Weber forged the principal of « axiological neutrality » to encourage the researcher to make a radical distinction between his scientific judgment and his own judgment values.
[5] Louise Corti identifies six methods for secondary analysis to enable the re-examination of a piece of research: « description – comparative research, restudy or follow-up study – re-analysis or secondary analysis – research design and methodological advancement – verifications – teaching and learning » (Corti 2007: 42-45)
[6] Since its foundation in 1974, the MURS develops different activities (conferences, debates, etc.) and publishes the review *Science et Devenir de l'Homme:* http://www.murs-france.org/
[7] In the Pierre Lévy sense - Lévy P., 1998, *Qu'est-ce que le virtuel ?*, Editions La Découverte, Coll. Poche / Essais, Paris.