The case for the development of a theoretical framework for Defence Acquisition

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Extant literature presently privileges practice over theory.

Practical

- Declarative knowledge, "proceduralised" into activity-based descriptions, which could lead to the accomplishment of practical actions, appear to be highly valued

- Strong focus on creating tools, methods and instruments for manipulating existing knowledge

Theoretical

- General absence of theoretical models which seek to bridge the metaphysical space between abstract concepts and practical outcomes

Concern – as all methodologies, including practical ones, come with some sort of philosophical and theoretical baggage, ignorance or misunderstanding of the implications of this" baggage" has potentially profound impact upon practice

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Risks for defence professionals operating without a clearly defined theory?

- Poor decision making, the consequences of which are compounded by greater proportions of the defence budget going to suppliers

- Loss of credibility with key stakeholders who may then increasingly turn to those who have less knowledge but superior influencing skills

- Difficult for defence acquisition to make sustainable improvements in order to meet present and future challenges

Theory – definitions

- "a statement of relations among concepts within a set of boundary assumptions and constraints" (Bacharach, 1989)

- "a set of interrelated constructs (concepts, definitions) and propositions that presents a systematic view of phenomena by specifying relations among variables with the purpose of explaining or predicting phenomena" (Kerlinger, 1973)

Core functions of a theory

1) **Explain causal relationships between variables**

2) **Predict what can/will happen.**

(NB. While achieving 2 is the "gold standard" of what constitutes a good theory, the reality is that while common in the natural sciences, such a standard is rarely achieved in the social sciences)

Implications for Defence Acquisition Theory – while the aspiration will be to reach 2 the reality is more likely to be limited to 1.

Types of Theories (a)

Grand Theories

- **Description** - "those large, overarching, all-encompassing explanations of social and political behaviours that give meaning to existence, enable us to order our lives and provide us with conceptual frameworks to think about reality" (Wiarda, 2010).
- **Position** - reject "the assumption that the natural sciences can provide adequate explanations for social phenomena
- **Criticism** – difficult to test empirically

Middle-range (middle level) theories

- Description - "skeletal" - "to paint a picture of incompleteness yet also stability… the skeleton remain unchanging yet incomplete"
- **Position –** while involving abstractions, of course, these are close enough to observed data to be incorporated into propositions that involve empirical data
- **Criticism** - Parsimony introduces delimiting boundaries it always carries the risk of overly delimiting what phenomena are explored i.e. conceal more than they reveal

Types of Theories (b)

- Numerous models based on different distinctions e.g. Merton's Grand and Middle (categorical) and Schneberger, et al., (2009) "T-t theory" (continuum)

- Meta- theory – "theory about theory" probably represents the most promising theory for defence acquisition as it acknowledges complexity and seeks to find ways of dealing with it other than simplification. It differs from the latter in its willingness to use multiple theories and to employ a broad range of research methodologies, including, but not restricted to, empiricism.

Defence Acquisition Issues

- Research Paradigms, approaches, strategies and methodologies

- Professionalism

- Political Ideology

- Servitization

- Intangible Assets

- Many others

Conclusion

- Scope and scale of defence acquisition activities has not been matched by similar developments in theoretical understanding of what is happening

- Theories come in many types and at this stage there would appear to be adequate justification for defence acquisition to engage in grand, middle-range and meta-theory development

- Irrespective of the type of theory used there is a clear need to sort out some key themes such as what is covered by defence acquisition; what sorts of disciplines need to be included; what research methods should be employed; who is responsible for developing and maintaining the relevant body of knowledge and how and with whom it should be shared, etc.

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- Dates
  – 28th & 29th October, 2014.

- Topic
  – Acquisition and its Theoretical Foundations

- Submit
  – Abstracts (800 words maximum) by 15th August, 2014