Research Paper
Impact Factor: 6.462
Peer Reviewed & Indexed Journal
www.ijmsrr.com

IJMSRR
E- ISSN - 2349-6746
ISSN -2349-6738

FINDING THE MIDDLE GROUND IN THE RIGOUR - RELEVANCE DICHOTOMY IN ORGANIZATIONAL RESEARCH: A FEW PROPOSITIONS

Shelly Jose
Associate Professor, Department of Personnel Management, Rajagiri College of Social Sciences, Kochi- 682 039.

Abstract
The world of the academic and the practitioner in the Management profession suffers from an illogical divide. The methods and practices of the first emphasizes rigour while in the process relevance is lost to the disadvantage of the practitioner world. Essentially the academic world exists for the practitioner to do a better job. The emphasis on measurement in the academic research borrowed from the physical sciences leaves out the essential questions and skills of judgment on the go in Management, which are more relevant for the practitioner. The emergent loss to the profession needs to be reduced and eliminated by bringing the two worlds closer by building bridges recognizing and empathizing the concerns of each other.

Keywords: academic- practitioner divide, rigour – relevance debate, research–practice gap academic – practitioner discourse, academic – practitioner socialization, contextualizing knowledge, tacit to explicit knowledge.

Introduction - The dichotomy explained

A discipline such as Management is essentially for practitioner application, though the relevant theory is developed or codified in the academic world. The discipline also has to necessarily take the academic garb as in Business Management schools at least for the brief period that it is studied by students, the prospective practitioners. The question that primarily comes to mind is why should all these theories be or is it really relevant for practice (Priem & Rosenstein, 2000)? .

The 'Theoretical' is viewed often with a certain detachment and rarely theory is practiced as such especially in the social sciences (Elias, 1956). This becomes all the more relevant when for instance a reader does not fully agree with the theory, but feels intimidated to question them and reasons that he may not have fully understood the theory. Thus, the dalliance with anything theoretical ends with its limited utility as an unavoidable necessity in the practical world as also in the examination oriented educational system. There is also the problem of trivial theory (Weick, 1989) and obviousness (Priem and Rosenstein, 2000).

On the other hand, nothing is more useful than a well formulated theory (Van De Ven, 1989). Good theory finds its value in setting the boundaries and assumptions and is relatively comprehensive yet succinct for the mind to conceive. At least a few of the academics might feel that he may not be a good practitioner complicated further by the saying that, those who know, go into practice and those who do not know go into teaching.

On the practitioner side, a good practitioner, especially one who lacks an academic qualification similarly feels what he practices may not stand the test of a sound theory, though it works. Or may be that he is not putting to practice what he learned in the business school. But it remains that if it works then nothing like it. Clearly, there is a need for academics understanding the essence of the world of the practitioner (Das, 2003) and vice versa.

IJMSRR
E- ISSN - 2349-6746
ISSN -2349-6738

A theory is a statement predicting which actions will lead to what results and why (Christensen, 2003). Therefore, a preferable approach is to foster theories that improve managerial decision making by specifying the causal connections between managerially valued outcomes (such as performance) and the practices (such as HRM practices) managers can adopt to bring them about (Donaldson, 2002).

The discussion on who should teach and who should practice seems to be a relevant distinction in a discipline like Management. Can one imagine a professor of medicine who keeps away from the patients and sticks only to the text books (Hodges, 2006)? If not, can one imagine a professor of business management who has never practiced in an organization? In this sense, the ideal B-school teacher is one who is in regular contact with the world of organizations (Scott et al, 1998; Mintzberg, 1989). And conversely, the ideal practitioner would go back to the world of academics either through his readings, or preferably by regular contact with the academic community (Bizzel, 1999).

To continue from the analogy of the doctor-patient, students of Management, unlike the students of medicine have no way of having the subject on the couch for examination, diagnosis and treatment. Instead the nearest parallel that they have is the case study, which presents situations for diagnosis, decisions and action (Ellet, 2007). It remains that the world of Management academics is populated with those who think that the subject case study at hand is substitute enough for the real thing and the world of practitioners is also similarly full of people who are comfortably insulated from the world of ongoing theoretical discourse (Gergen, 2001).

Part of the dichotomy is that the world of business embraced the scientific model and not the professional model of medicine and law (Bennis & O'Toole, 2005). It may be easier to study organizations from the outside in a purely abstract way. But what is lost in the process is that statistics and experimental designs offer little insight into the complex social and human factor. Academics therefore end up writing for the academician, not for the practitioner. Significantly, (Hambrick, 1994) lamented about the incestuous production and consumption of research by academics for academics.
From a knowledge management perspective, the academic harbors a great deal of structured internal knowledge such as research reports, theoretical models and solutions to standard problems, whereas the practitioner has external knowledge such as competitive intelligence and the nuances and intricacies of actual human behavior (Maungwa & Fourie, 2020). What is sought from an academic – practitioner bridge building perspective is the creation of an effective environment for the creation, exchange and use of knowledge.

In the quest for rewards in the academic world, the skew is towards journals dealing with academic wrting by academics for academics which leave out the practitioner which in the ultimate analysis works to the detriment of the profession as such. By such compartmentalisation, the academics remain cocooned in their discourse and the practitioners remain too busy in their world of action (Gorur, 2017). The develpoment of the profession calls for bridges across the world of discourse and the world of action.

Practitioners often know what the academic painstakingly find out. Often what the academic brings in is the rigour and the chief difference emerges from the need for rigour emphasized by the academic and the need for relevance by the practitioner. While researchers seek rigour through generalizable and defensible insights, managers prefer relevant, context-specific, and prescriptive advice (Kondrat, 1995).
The dochotomy is known variously as rigour - relevance gap (Vermeulen, 2005), research–practice gap (Sharma and Bansal, 2020) and academic – practitioner divide (Bartunek, 2007). The problem is so

IJMSRR
E- ISSN - 2349-6746
ISSN -2349-6738

severe that some believe that the large rigour relevance gap in management research is 'unbridgeable' (Kieser & Leiner, 2009; Daft & Lewin, 2008; Weick, 2001). Some remain optimistic and hopeful regarding the possible integration between relevance and rigour in the research on organisational management in general (Starkey & Madan, 2001).

A few propositions

Literature identifies pitting the usefulness of 'experiential' and 'academic' knowledge against each other, calling for a new, integrative approach to business education and research (Augier and March, 2007).

Framing research questions

Management Research and teaching is fraught with significant challenges at the interface between the world of the academic researcher and the world of the business practitioner, both best met by academic – practitioner collaboration (Amabile et al, 2001). The challenge to the larger domain encompassing the academic – practitioner world is to frame research questions that will be meaningful to practitioners, gaining access to the organizations for research, designing data collection instruments that are appropriate for modern work settings and interpreting the findings within the business context (Beckman, 2020). In short matching the relevance required for the practitioner with the rigour endemic to the academic semantically.

Bridging the language barrier

At the heart of the intended collaboration is the coming together of individuals who differ in notable ways sharing information and working towards specific purposes. Essentially the academic - practitioner bridge seeks to reduce the gap between the language and thinking modes of the academic and the practitioner (Starkey & Madan, 2001). What does it mean to the practitioner who by necessity in his day to day life thinks more holistically to hear words like research question, independent and dependent variable, mediating and moderating variable? Similarly, causal models, boxes and arrows intimidate the practitioner while the academic revels in them. Statistics and measures confound rather than enlighten the practitioner. These are the tools of the academic but the management practitioners do not always see rigourous methodologies as particularly relevant or helpful.

Moving from dry logic to live emotion

In reporting the relevance to practice in a purely logical and detached way, the reader is rather put off having come across less of emotions. The emotions are the components of the arguments that are relegated in the name of objectivity in research. However, ideas 'stick' based on their ability to tap emotions that are common across individuals (Kemp et al 2020). That is to present accounts that are simple, unexpected, concrete, credible, emotional and likely to be told as stories. Thus, research reports with emotions and affirmations that, what the practitioners thought indeed are what is acceptable from an academic point as well, do contribute more to stickiness and recall and are therefore more likely to be practiced. In this way the rigourous work of the academic can be made relevant for the practitioner.

Contextualsing the theory

The austere, decontextualised world of the academic will have to be put aside for the bridge to be built across for the practitioner. An answer to this critical flaw is for the scholars to give meaning to isolated facts, putting them in perspective, making connections across the disciplines, locating the specialties in the larger context, illuminating data in revealing ways and building bridges to non – specialists too.

IJMSRR
E- ISSN - 2349-6746
ISSN -2349-6738

Clarifying Time frames

The academically oriented begin with an assessment of the potential contributions which can be made to theoretical knowledge. Practitioner research is premised on the identification of an organisational problem that is currently presenting concern. Time frame- wise the academic research is based on long term contribution to a knowledge base whereas practitioner requires results in the short term (Corley & Gioia, 2011). Clarifying time frames would reduce the distance between the academic and the practitioner.

Specifying the frame of reference

On the whole the academic research tries to do justice to the question 'Do results support hypotheses?' and practitioners are interested in 'Are results valuable to organisation?' Academics and practitioners have fundamentally different frames of reference with respect to the important questions such as the types of information believed to constitute valid bases for action, relevant for the practitioners and the ways in which information is ordered and arranged for sensemaking and the past experiences used to evaluate the validity of knowledge claims valid for the academics (Rynes et. al, 2001).

Use of appropriate metaphors

Often academics create metaphors used to symbolically create the world in meaningful ways (Rynes et. al, 2001). Academic dispositions towards practitioners that are likely to foster mutual relationship include trying to enter into and understand practitioner worlds and modes of knowing and empathizing and thereby using practitioner identifiable metaphors. There are many studies that explicitly acknowledge the academic and practical relevance, while retaining efforts to improve methodological rigour (Ritala et al, 2020). Others (Roehling et al. 2000) did content analysis of academic and practitioner journals for instance to expose new employment relationship relevant to both. Sharma and Bansal (2020) posits a method to bring both rigour and relevance is co creating an integrative approach, suggesting that scholars may simultaneously attain rigour and relevance when they combine the use of metaphor as an analytical tool.

Goal of tacit to explicit

There are significant differences in the goals academics and practitioners seek to influence, the social systems in which they operate, the variables they manipulate and acceptable timeframes. The key to knowledge creation lies in the mobilisation and conversion of tacit knowledge (Nonaka, 1995) available with the practitioners from the individual levels to the organisational levels. However, acadmic journals tend to be mired in explicit to explicit conversion and that too confined within the academic boundaries rather than across the academic – practitioner boundaries. Instead there needs more conversations between the two for moving the tacit to the explicit realm. A theory is considered truly interesting if it has repercussions on both theoretical and practical dimensions (Davis, 1971). Asking questions that are of importance to practitioner reality, while not making concessions in terms of rigour in developing theory and empirical evidence, would provide most value (Vermeulen, 2005).

Reframing the debate on rigour and relevance

Case studies, reflective essays like the present one, and inductive theory building which are disadvantaged in journals are the very stuff that are most likely to resonate with practitioners, as they have one of their goals the externalisation of assumptions, norms and practices, other words tacit knowledge. Part of the problem is in the academic institutes' inclination to go the pure sciences way rather than the professional way. The scientific model is predicated on the assumption that business is like any other physical science like Physics or Chemistry. Business calls for the merger of many different disciplines such as mathematics, economics, psychology, philosophy and sociology. Mode 2 knowledge production in which a diversity of actors from different disciplines collaborate in context-specific, problem-focused research (Aram and Salipante, 2003) is one of the solutions. The ambidextrous or bi-competent scholarship can most likely occur among effective teachers because they span the boundaries between research and practice. The current debate over the rigour- relevance gap should be reframed from how to improve rigour or relevance to how to develop good theories by having a proper rigour-relevance balance (Ping Li, 2011).

Socialisation between academics and practitioners

Involving practitioners in research problem formulation is an example of how the issue can be adressed, a different frame of thinking for engaged scholarship. Unless successful socialisaion occurs between acadmeics and pracitioners, understanding and empathising with each other, attempts to transfer knowledge across the divide fails. And in the absense of effective intergroup socialisation, the independent social identities of academics and practitioners are likely to solidify to the detriment of the Management Profession. Else the phenomena of "lost in translation" gap (when managerially relevant research fails to reach practitioners) and the "lost before translation" gap (when managerially relevant research is not undertaken by academics) (Shapiro, Kirkman, and Courtney, 2007) happens. Joint symposia between academics and practitioners, consulting relationships, sabbaticals in industry, action research, joint academic-practitioner research teams, training with distributed practice (Rynes et. al, 2001) and recognising high-impact faculty research and strengthening interactions between faculty and managers are among the solutions.

Conclusion

The professions inevitably have to deal with the academic- practitioner divide. For reasons the two may have evolved over a period of time, however blinded to the reasons of existence of both. For the professions to gain there has to be ways of bridging the divide primarily arising out of the division of labor principle. While the pure sciences may do research for the sake of research and communicate academic to academic, the professions and social sciences need to go one step further to promote more of integration across the divide since the world of acaedmics and research rigour in the professions exists so as to be useful for practice.

References

1. Amabile, T. M., Patterson, C., Mueller, J., Wojcik, T., Odomirok, P. W., Marsh, M., & Kramer, S. J. (2001). Academic-practitioner collaboration in management research: A case of cross-profession collaboration. *Academy of management journal*, *44*(2), 418-431.
2. Aram, J. D., & Salipante Jr, P. F. (2003). Bridging scholarship in management: Epistemological reflections. *British Journal of Management*, *14*(3), 189-205.
3. Augier, M., & March, J. G. (2007). The pursuit of relevance in management education. *California Management Review*, *49*(3), 129-146.
4. Bartunek, J. M. (2007). Academic-practitioner collaboration need not require joint or relevant research: Toward a relational scholarship of integration. *Academy of management journal*, *50*(6), 1323-1333.
5. Beckman, S. L. (2020). To frame or reframe: where might design thinking research go next?. *California Management Review*, *62*(2), 144-162.
6. Bennis, W. G., & O'Toole, J. (2005). How business schools have lost their way. *Harvard business review*, *83*(5), 96-104.

7. Bizzell, P. (1999). Hybrid academic discourses: What, why, how. *Composition Studies*, *27*(2), 7-21.
8. Christensen, C. M., & Raynor, M. E. (2003). Why hard-nosed executives should care about management theory. *Harvard business review*, *81*(9), 66-75.
9. Corley, K. G., & Gioia, D. A. (2011). Building theory about theory building: what constitutes a theoretical contribution?. *Academy of management review*, *36*(1), 12-32.
10. Daft, R. L., & Lewin, A. Y. (2008). Perspective—Rigour and relevance in organization studies: Idea migration and academic journal evolution. *Organization science*, *19*(1), 177-183.
11. Das, T. K. (2003). Managerial perceptions and the essence of the managerial world: what is an interloper business executive to make of the academic-researcher perceptions of managers?. *British Journal of Management*, *14*(1), 23-32.
12. Davis, M. S. (1971). That's interesting! Towards a phenomenology of sociology and a sociology of phenomenology. *Philosophy of the social sciences*, *1*(2), 309-344.
13. Donaldson, L. (2002). Damned by our own theories: Contradictions between theories and management education. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, *1*(1), 96-106.
14. Elias, N. (1956). Problems of involvement and detachment. *The British Journal of Sociology*, *7*(3), 226-252.
15. Ellet, W. (2007). *The case study handbook: How to read, discuss, and write persuasively about cases*. Harvard Business Press.
16. Gergen, K. J. (2001). *Social construction in context*. Sage.
17. Gorur, R. (2017). Towards productive critique of large-scale comparisons in education. *Critical Studies in Education*, *58*(3), 341-355.
18. Hambrick, D. C. 1994. What if the Academy actually mattered? Academy of Management Review, 19: 11–16.
19. Hodges, B. (2006). Medical education and the maintenance of incompetence. *Medical teacher*, *28*(8), 690-696.
20. Kemp, E., Briggs, E., & Anaza, N. A. (2020). The emotional side of organizational decision-making: examining the influence of messaging in fostering positive outcomes for the brand. *European Journal of Marketing*, *54*(7), 1609-1640.
21. Kieser, A., & Leiner, L. (2009). Why the rigour–relevance gap in management research is unbridgeable. *Journal of Management Studies*, *46*(3), 516-533.
22. Kondrat, M. E. 1995. Concept, act and interest in professional practice: Implications of an empowerment perspective. Social Service Review, 69: 405–428.
23. Maungwa, T., & Fourie, I. (2020). How experiences reported on intermediary information seeking from inter-disciplinary contexts can inform a study on competitive intelligence professionals.
24. Mintzberg, H. (1989). *Mintzberg on management: Inside our strange world of organizations*. Simon and Schuster.
25. Nonaka, I., & Takeuchi, H. (1995). The Knowledge Creating. *New York*, *304*.
26. Ping Li, P. (2011). The rigour–relevance balance for engaged scholarship: New frame and new agenda for trust research and beyond. *Journal of Trust Research*, *1*(1), 1-21.
27. Priem, R. L., & Rosenstein, J. (2000). Is organization theory obvious to practitioners? A test of one established theory. *Organization Science*, *11*(5), 509-524.
28. Ritala, P., Schneider, S., & Michailova, S. (2020). Innovation management research methods: embracing rigour and diversity. *R&D Management*, *50*(3), 297-308.

29. Roehling, M. V., Cavanaugh, M. A., Moynihan, L. M., & Boswell, W. R. (2000). The nature of the new employment relationship: A content analysis of the practitioner and academic literatures. *Human Resource Management*, *39*(4), 305-320.
30. Rynes, S. L., Bartunek, J. M., & Daft, R. L. (2001). Across the great divide: Knowledge creation and transfer between practitioners and academics. *Academy of management Journal*, *44*(2), 340-355.
31. Scott, C. R., Corman, S. R., & Cheney, G. (1998). Development of a structurational model of identification in the organization. *Communication Theory*, *8*(3), 298-336.
32. Shapiro, D. L., Kirkman, B. L., & Courtney, H. G. (2007). Perceived causes and solutions of the translation problem in management research. *Academy of Management Journal*, *50*(2), 249-266.
33. Sharma, G., & Bansal, P. (2020). Cocreating rigourous and relevant knowledge. *Academy of Management Journal*, *63*(2), 386-410.
34. Starkey, K., & Madan, P. (2001). Bridging the relevance gap: Aligning stakeholders in the future of management research. *British Journal of management*, *12*, S3-S26.
35. Starkey, K., & Madan, P. (2001). Bridging the relevance gap: Aligning stakeholders in the future of management research. *British Journal of management*, *12*, S3-S26.
36. Van de Ven, A. H. (1989). Nothing is quite so practical as a good theory. *Academy of management Review*, *14*(4), 486-489.
37. Vermeulen, F. (2005). On rigour and relevance: Fostering dialectic progress in management research. *Academy of Management Journal*, *48*(6), 978-982.
38. Weick, K. E. (1989). Theory construction as disciplined imagination. *Academy of management review*, *14*(4), 516-531.
39. Weick, K. E. (2001). Gapping the relevance bridge: Fashions meet fundamentals in management research. *British journal of management*, *12*, S71-S75.