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Academics and Practitioners Are Alike and Unlike: The Paradoxes of Academic-Practitioner Relationships

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ABSTRACT

In this essay we challenge standard approaches to the academic-practitioner gap that essentially pit sides against each other, treating them as dichotomous. Instead, we identify and suggest ways of working with such dichotomies in order to foster research and theory building. We delineate several tensions associated with the gap, including differing logics, time dimensions, communication styles, rigor and relevance, and interests and incentives, and show how such tensions are valuable themselves for research and theorizing. We show that the gap often reflects views of conflicting groups of academics, while practitioners' voices are not always incorporated; thus we add a practitioner's voice to the conversation. We describe the dialectical forces that foster the tensions associated with the gap, including initiatives of national governments, ranking systems and special issues of journals. We then show how the tensions represent fundamental, unresolvable paradoxes that can be generative of new research and practice if appreciated as such. We suggest several implications for research that build on tensions, dialectics and paradox. We conclude with a brief reflection about the tensions we experienced while writing this essay and what these might suggest about the importance of academic-practitioner relationships.

Keywords: academic-practitioner gap; dialectics; paradox; practice; relevance; research; rigor; tensions; theory

ACADEMICS AND PRACTITIONERS ARE ALIKE AND UNLIKE: THE PARADOXES OF ACADEMIC-PRACTITIONER RELATIONSHIPS

It does not take much effort to picture discussions of academic-practitioner relationships that focus on the “gap” (or divide or similar metaphors) between academics and practitioners, between rigor and relevance, between theory and practice or similar terms (Austin & Bartunek, 2012; Bansal, Bertels, Ewart, MacConnachie, & O'Brien, 2012; Berry, 1995; Briner, Denyer, & Rousseau, 2009; Cascio & Aguinis, 2008; Dipboye, 2007; Empson, 2013; Hambrick 1994; Rynes, Bartunek & Daft, 2001; Rynes, Giluk, & Brown, 2007). For virtually all such discussions, the primary focus has been on the possibility or advisability of “bridging” the gap (e.g. Daft & Lewin, 1990; 2008; Earley, 1999; Vermeulen, 2005) and, if advisable, how to accomplish this. Yet, despite multiple efforts to lessen the gap between academics and practitioners, some see it as increasing rather than decreasing (e.g. Markides, 2007; Tsui, 2013) while others (e.g. Dipboye, In Press) wonder whether the metaphor of a gap has outlived its usefulness.

Imagine, instead, an approach to this gap that does not try to resolve or bridge it, but treats it as fundamentally important in itself for scholarly research and theorizing. Such an approach does not take a side in conversations about whether effective academic-practitioner relationships are possible. Rather, it treats academic-practitioner tensions as significant phenomena whose exploration can suggest important knowledge that is pertinent not only to academics and practitioners, but also to other relationships that include tensions of some sort. Our aim here is to foster this type of approach, to move beyond discussing the gap to

appreciating the importance of the tensions it encompasses and building on these for scholarly purposes.

More specifically, in this essay we sketch a foundation for research and theorizing that builds on, without trying to resolve, tensions underlying academic-practitioner relationships. This foundation is rooted in studies and theorizing regarding tensions, dialectics and paradox (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989; Quinn & Cameron, 1988; Seo & Creed, 2002; Seo, Putnam & Bartunek, 2004; Smith & Lewis, 2011; Swan, Bresnen, Robertson, Newell & Dopson, 2010). It is based on the assumption that uncovering tensions can contribute to theory building (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989). Thus it has the potential to stimulate new types of scholarly inquiries into a topic that has been discussed, argued and debated for more than fifty years, but often in ways that are much more based in normative opinions than in empirical questioning.

IMPORTANCE AND SCOPE OF THE TOPIC

The gap between management academics and practitioners has been of concern for decades, at least as long as early attempts to establish administration as a scientific discipline in the 1950s. James Thompson (1956: 105), the first editor of *Administrative Science Quarterly*, articulated the need for a relationship between (improved) scholarship and practice in *ASQ*'s first issue. He stressed the need for the development of an administrative science, given that "Much of our literature is lore" (also see Khurana, 2007, ch. 7), and argued that administrative scholars "need to explore the empirical findings in the social sciences which may be pertinent and, when necessary, to translate these into administrative situations, at least hypothetically" (p. 110).

Thompson's (1956) argument about the need for administrative science to become scientific was reinforced by Ford Foundation (Gordon & Howell, 1959) and Carnegie

Foundation (Pierson, 1959) reports that criticized the then state of business school education, characterizing it as largely trade school education without adequate scholarly content. Among other recommendations, Gordon and Howell (1959: 425) stated that: “Business schools . . . need to move in the direction of . . . better informed and more scholarly faculties that are capable of carrying on more significant research, and with a greater appreciation of the contributions to be made to the development of business competence by both the underlying . . . disciplines and the judicious use of . . . materials and methods.” The reports led to significant changes in faculty hiring and a much greater emphasis on scholarly research in business schools.

Ongoing academic discussion and debate about relationships between rigorous research and relevance to management practitioners have taken place since the 1960s, with opinions varying considerably about how valuable the increased research focus has been. Our online supplemental appendix provides a listing of many of these works

In reviewing this entire literature, we found that the number of articles that address a gap of some type between management academia and practice in some way has increased considerably since 2000 (see appendix). In addition, the vast majority of the publications (87%) are non-empirical; during any given decade there have never been more than 20% empirical articles. A small number of articles are explicitly theory-building papers, but the great majority are essays, many of which consist primarily of normative opinion statements. Clearly there is a need for more empirical research on this topic.

Two other characteristics of this body of literature stand out. The debate has taken place mostly in journals aimed at academics rather than practitioners, and the journals in which it has evolved are not always regarded as top-tier. Thus, while attention to the topic has increased

substantially, the debate has rarely given much attention to practitioner perspectives and the substance of the attention has not always fostered the academic credibility of the phenomenon. To partly remedy the lack of attention to practitioner perspectives, in parts of this essay we include commentary that John Austin, a former academic who is currently a principal at *Decision Strategies International* (also see at www.tripletranslation.com) and actively engaged in executive education, provided in response to our request for a friendly review. To partly remedy the academic credibility of the topic we are laying out a conceptual foundation for use in future research and theorizing.

TENSIONS REGARDING ACADEMIC-PRACTITIONER RELATIONSHIPS

The term “tensions” refers to a wide variety of dichotomies, dualities, conflicts, inconsistencies and contradictory pulls or demands experienced by those in a particular setting that appear to represent different and contradictory poles and, as such, seem to require a choice of one or the other (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989; Seo et al., 2004; Smith & Lewis, 2011). As Seo et al. (2004: 74) comment, tensions and dualities “are not simply alternatives.... The choice to focus on one of the poles creates a tension and difficulty to enact both ends of the continuum simultaneously.” Seo et al. give the example of tensions in organization development between intervening in groups versus whole organizations, or between using problem-based versus appreciative-based processes. These are not necessarily mutually exclusive choices, but they are often treated as either-or decisions, and when this is the case they create polarities.

There are several tensions regarding the academic-practitioner gap, each of which has (at least) two sides, and some of which, as scholars have commented (Augier & March, 2007; Bridgman, 2007; Dunbar & Bresser, 2013; Stokes, 1997; Walsh, Tushman, Kimberly, Starbuck,

& Ashford, 2007), date back at least to the 1950s. We briefly describe some of the more prominently mentioned tensions here.

Differing logics

There are discussions of how academics and practitioners operate out of different logics, “differences in defining and tackling problems – that prevail in the systems of science and practice” (Kieser & Leiner, 2009: 517). Basing their arguments on Luhmann’s systems theory, Kieser and Leiner (p. 516) emphatically argue that “From a system theory perspective, social systems (such as science and practice) are self-referential or autopoietic, which means that communication elements of one system, such as science, cannot be authentically integrated into communication of other systems, such as the system of a business organization.” Kieser and Leiner (2012) contend that this difference in logics extends to collaborative research involving academics and practitioners, making it extremely difficult, if not impossible, for academics and practitioners truly to integrate knowledge in such settings.

There is no question that the logics (and, often, assumptions and frames of reference, cf. Beech, MacIntosh, & MacLean; Shrivastava & Mitroff, 1984) of academics and practitioners often differ, including the ways in which they formulate questions for inquiry (Briner & Denyer, 2012). As one simple example, practitioners rarely (if ever) begin with literature reviews as a way to frame their questions (Nielsen, 2010; Shapiro, et al., 2007), while academics do so as a matter of course.

On the other hand, some academics argue that differences in logics between academics and practitioners can be generative, contributing to positive research outcomes. Amabile, Patterson, Mueller Wojcik, Kramer, Odomirok, & Marsh (2001), for example, described an

instance of academic-practitioner collaboration that not only succeeded in accomplishing its research goals (e.g. Amabile, Schnarzel, Moneta & Kramer, 2006), but did so in a way that was useful to all parties to the exchange. Bartunek and Louis (1996) described several successful examples of collaborative insider-outsider research teams in which the combination of academic and practitioner perspectives fostered understanding of organizational phenomena better than either academics or practitioners could have accomplished alone (e.g. Bartunek, Walsh & Lacey, 2000). Berry (1995) and Avenier and Parmentier Cajaiba (2012) have also described collaborative academic-practitioner research efforts with positive outcomes.

Time dimensions

There is agreement that academics' and practitioners' time horizons differ, with academics' timelines being much longer than practitioners' (e.g. Bansal et al., 2012; Huff & Huff, 2001; Salipante & Aram, 2002; Zaccaro & Banks, 2004). Some academics argue that this creates problems for scholarly research (e.g. Walsh et al., 2007), in that high quality research generally takes much more time than managers typically allot to dealing with issues of concern.

Others suggest that this type of time calculus may be too simple, and that it is necessary to take multiple dimensions of time into account. For example, Rynes McNatt and Bretz (1999) and Tushman and O'Reilly (2007) have demonstrated that the time academics spend developing relationships with practitioners pays off in the long run, enabling more insightful and impactful research. Austin (2013) suggests that for practitioners there are key translation "moments" unrelated to speed or length of time. In other words, time to conduct research is not the only dimension of time that matters (Albert, 2013), and considering multiple time dimensions simultaneously may reduce academic-practitioner conflicts associated exclusively with length of

time needed to accomplish research.

Communication practices

There are multiple potential communication difficulties between academics and practitioners, sufficiently so that there are frequent discussions of the necessity for knowledge translation between them (e.g. Aram & Salipante, 2003; Bansal et al., 2012; Kram, Wasserman & Yip, 2012; Marcos & Denyer, 2012, Mohrman et al., 2001; Wasserman & Kram, 2009). The difficulties are due in part to differences in the kinds of knowledge representation that work best for the two groups (cf. Boland, Singh, Salipante, Aram, Fay, & Kanawattanachai, 2001). For example, Kuncel and Rigdon (2012: 43) described how some conventions of academic communication (e.g. “accounting for 10% of the variance”) may not make any “practical sense.” Further, they noted that visual displays might be particularly useful for communicating “practical trade-offs to decision makers” (p. 50), though academics do not often use them.

On the other hand, there are several illustrations of successful communication between practitioners and academics (Bartunek, 2007; Hodgkinson & Rousseau, 2009). For example, scholars operating out of interpretivist frameworks often emphasize the benefits of practitioner interpretation and meaning-making regarding scholarly findings (Jarzabkowski et al., 2010; Mohrman & Lawler, 2011; Mohrman et al 2001; Ospina & Dodge, 2005). Such scholars argue that practitioners can help academics make sense of some of their findings better than academics are likely to be able to do on their own (Dipboye, In Press). Schein (2006; 2010), whose scholarship has been highly influential among academics, described how crucial and foundational his engagement with practice has been to his academic work. John Austin suggested to us that “The value of the academic is often less in the actual research and more in

helping practitioners improve their critical thinking so that they can better distinguish between good and bad data (regardless of whether the data were generated in the academic world)".

Rigor and relevance

The bulk of the literature addressing academic-practitioner gaps focuses on the alleged rigor of academic research (with a positivist approach to rigor often taken for granted) as contrasted with the perceived need for relevance on the part of practitioners (cf. Avenier & Parmentier Cajaiba, 2012; McGahan, 2007; Vermeulen, 2007). Some scholars (e.g. Daft & Lewin, 2008; Kieser & Leiner, 2009; Rasche & Behnam, 2009) argue strongly that academic rigor and practitioner relevance are almost mutually exclusive. For example, Daft and Lewin (2008: 180), founders of *Organization Science*, argued that "Journals that serve as a source of academic knowledge should have a fundamental mission to publish diverse new ideas of high quality without regard to relevance to the world of practice, even though diffusion to practice may happen. ... Academic relevance is a sufficient and realistic criterion for publishing research in an academic journal such as OS." Das (2003: 29) opined that "To my mind, the issue of relevance has to be analyzed with full recognition of the natural divide that separates the two worlds of academic research and management practice, remarkably akin to the disjuncture between the two cultures of the scientist and the non-scientist." For some academics there is anxiety that emphasizing relevance interferes with the conduct of high-quality basic research, especially research that might challenge practitioners or whose relevance may not be immediately obvious (Hinings & Greenwood, 2002; Knights, 2008; Offerman & Spiros, 2001; Peng & Dess, 2010; Walsh et al., 2007).

Some who believe strongly in the value of relevance denigrate academics who do not

focus on relevance as much as they do rigor. For example, Augier and March (2007: 131) complained that “Although business schools secure a substantial part of their financial resources from the business community, they are seen as using those resources largely to pursue their own agendas of irrelevant research,” while Oviatt and Miller (1989: 304) wrote about “the irrelevance and intransigence” of business professors with respect to the “real world” of business. Bennis and O’Toole (2005: 100) bemoaned that “a management professor who publishes rigorously executed studies in the highly quantitative *Administrative Science Quarterly* is considered a star, while an academic whose articles appear in the accessible pages of a professional review - which is much more likely to influence business practices - risks being denied tenure.”

On the other hand, many authors have confidence that rigor and relevance are not necessarily distinct. Indeed, they may be complementary, and scholarship that does not attempt to accomplish both is harmful for both research and practice (e.g. Ghoshal, 2005; Gulati, 2007; Tushman & O’Reilly, 2007). Vermeulen (2005), for example, argued that rigor is necessary for relevance. The evidence-based management movement is entirely based on the assumption that rigorous research can and should be very relevant (e.g. Briner & Denyer, 2012; Rousseau, 2012; Rousseau, Manning & Denyer, 2008) John Austin concurred with this view, commenting that “Rigor is a term that is taken very seriously by most executives I have worked with. There is an implied normative definition of rigor (among academics), and even the suggestion that practitioners are not focused on rigor may cause further tension... Relevance is central to the definition of rigor for the practitioner.”

Some academics have begun to sketch out ways that rigor and relevance can be considered orthogonal. Stokes (1997), focusing on the natural sciences, introduced the term

“Pasteur’s Quadrant” to emphasize that research may or may not include a quest for fundamental understanding and it may or may not include considerations of use. Pasteur conducted research that focused on both “understanding and use” (Stokes, 1997: 64), and thus Pasteur’s quadrant describes situations where quests for fundamental understanding and considerations of use are jointly present. Tushman and O’Reilly (2007) argued that academic research in business schools should fall into Pasteur’s quadrant. Similarly, Anderson et al. (2001: 393-394), followed by Hodgkinson, Heriot, and Anderson (2001), proposed a two-by-two working model where practical relevance and methodological rigor are independently high or low. They referred to situations where both were high as pragmatic science, where only rigor was high as pedantic science, where only relevance was high as popularist science, and where both were low as puerile science.

The most formal development of a research approach where rigor and relevance are both designed to be high is in “Mode 2” research. This approach was introduced originally in the natural sciences in the United Kingdom as a contrast with standard “Mode 1” research (Gibbons, Limoges, Nowotny, Schwartzman, Scott, & Trow, 1994). Tranfield and Starkey (1998) brought discussion of Mode 2 into the organizational and management literatures. They described Mode 1 organizational research as standard rigorous research that focuses only on researchers’ questions and answers; while rigorous, it is often not relevant. In contrast, Tranfield and Starkey (1998: 348, quoting Pettigrew, 1995: 3) described Mode 2 research as characterized by research problems framed in the context of application (rather than theory or previous literature); as transdisciplinary (as opposed to single-discipline thinking); as including diffusion of implications for practice based on findings occurring in the process of research; as involving teams of

researchers that include both academics and practitioners with mixed skills and experience, and as a more socially and politically accountable knowledge production process and output. Thus, Mode 2 research was portrayed, almost by definition, as both rigorous and relevant.

Interests and incentives

Many scholars suggest that academics and practitioners have differing interests and incentives. Shapiro and colleagues (2007: 111) argued that “the tenured, well-published academic ... potentially has a lot to lose and little to gain from including practitioners in the competition for coveted conference and journal review positions....(while) the experienced manager is ... likely to favor self-serving explanations for the causes of the gap (e.g., problems with academic incentives) and to think the solution lies with ‘changing the other side’ (e.g., opening up the Ivory Tower to practitioners and their concerns).” Garman (2011: 129), a practitioner, commented that “On the academic side, currently dominant cultures and incentive systems all but guarantee the irrelevance of most scholarly work to anyone except other scholars. On the practice side, managers rarely frame their dilemmas and decisions in ways that lend themselves to scholarly inquiry, find little reason to subject their own research to the peer review process, and rarely look to academia for practical insights.”

Some academics express concern about the legitimacy of managers’ interests, and how they might have negative influences on organizational scholarship. Hinings and Greenwood (2002: 413) argued that when organizational theory moved to business schools from sociology departments it moved away from central questions of “who controls and the consequences of that control” towards understanding how to design better organizations, leaving “the question of consequences, i.e. efficient and effective for whom ... usually left unasked.” Similarly, Mesny

and Mailhot (2012: 200) commented that “In the relevance gap debate, we cannot escape long-standing questions of whose interests we are trying to serve,” with Nicolini (2009: 616) adding that “looking at knowing in practice necessarily requires addressing issues of interests, conflict, and power.”

On the other hand, Avenier and Cajaiba Parmentier (2012) and others suggest that it is possible to develop research questions that meet both academic and practitioner interests, and Orr and Bennett (2009) suggest that academic-practitioner interests may overlap. Pettigrew (2001, p. S66) commented of Mode 2 approaches to research that “the new opportunities for a contextualist and dynamic social science will offer management researchers a further attractive bridge to user communities who are often interested in how and why general patterns are variably expressed in different organizational and national settings.” Keleman and Bansal (2002) argued that Mode 2 research can accommodate a wide range of interests in a particular setting. Knights and Scarbrough (2010) described the development of joint interests among academics and practitioners with regard to knowledge management and communities of practice.

Commentary on how and by whom the tensions are addressed

The vast majority of authors writing about these tensions, at least in the sources that we have found, are academics. This is as true if the outlet is the *Harvard Business Review* or *California Management Review* as if the outlet is the *Journal of Management* or the *Academy of Management Journal*. Furthermore, while some of the discussion is about academics in relation to practitioners, most of the discussion is actually about – and aimed at -- other academics, and whether or not the other academics hold what the author considers the proper viewpoint (Augier & March, 2007; Bennis & O’Toole, 2005).

What is noticeable by its absence is the comparative lack of practitioner voice in the conversation. A few (e.g. Garman, 2011 and the practitioner coauthors of the Bansal et al. 2012 paper) have added to this discussion, but on the whole it is being carried out primarily by academics, sometimes speaking on behalf of what they perceive to be practitioner perspectives.

Academic-practitioner tensions may not be as significant to practitioners as to academics. A search of the table of contents of all issues of *Business Horizons*, for example, indicates that the terms “rigor” and “relevance” are hardly ever used there. A search of the table of contents of *Fortune* magazine online indicates that the terms are never used there either, at least not in combination.

John Austin observed that this might be due in part to the narrowness of academics’ self-identification: “Many academics downplay their role as teachers and focus on their identities as researchers. This self-identification as a researcher rather than an educator may in fact get in the way of successful academic practitioner engagements” Further, Austin notes, “I have found practitioners often more motivated to help others learn from their experience than they are motivated to help academics further some research agenda.”

The upshot of all this is that instead of the debate being between academics and practitioners, it is more frequently between academics with strongly differing opinions. Gulati (2007: 777) observed that, “Many business school academics have ... (separated themselves) into two tribes on either side of a chasm of sometimes brutal identity warfare. ... Not surprisingly, our identities form around these projections and expectations.”

DIALECTICS AND PARADOX IN ACADEMIC-PRACTITIONER RELATIONSHIPS

Our presentation of tensions leaves them as separate poles. However, these poles are

actually in ongoing and evolving relationships with each other; Bartunek (2003: 202) observed that dichotomizing “simultaneously separates the poles from each other and links them together”. To understand their evolving relationships, it is useful to think of them in terms of dialectics and paradox.

Dialectics

Dialectics can be described as “contradictory elements (thesis and antithesis) resolved through integration (synthesis) which, over time, will confront new opposition” (Smith & Lewis, 2011: 387). A dialectic perspective makes evident that tensions are rarely static. Rather, according to Seo and Creed (2002: 223), contradictions present in a system are “driving forces” of change in it. These contradictions are found within “concrete mechanisms” that create the inconsistencies and tensions that enable and foster change.

While on a surface level it may sometimes appear that the academic-practitioner/rigor-relevance gap remains the same now as it was more than 50 years ago, there is much evidence that it has evolved. In the 1950s, for example, rigor of any type in management research was lacking, and relevance was described as linear (Thompson, 1956), with application flowing (if at all) from basic research to applied research to application by practitioners. By the time of this writing, in contrast, there are well established standards of rigor and fewer expectations that relevance will flow directly from rigorous research. Rather, there are disputes, as we have shown above, about how compatible the two are at all. These changes have come about in part at least because of forces affecting each of the poles.

Forces affecting evolution of the tensions. At least two factors have contributed to the side of the debate that emphasizes the incompatibility of academics and practitioners. One was

the Ford and Carnegie Foundation reports (Gordon & Howell, 1959; Pierson, 1959) that emphasized the importance and distinction of rigor in faculty research. This in turn led to hiring faculty trained in core disciplines such as psychology and economics, as opposed to faculty with practitioner experience. These new faculty members were less versed in business practice.

A second factor has been the rise in the importance of ratings of scholarly impact, such as the Thomson-Reuters Web of Science and Google Scholar, which emphasize how much an article or book is cited by other academics. As Flickinger, Tuschke, Gruber-Muecke and Fiedler (2013) show, it is the rigor of articles, much more than intimations of relevance for practice, that leads to citations in other articles in top-tier journals. As such ratings have become more prevalent they have tended to foster attention to rigor (as defined by academics) to the relative neglect of relevance to practice.

On the other hand, fostering at least some compatibility, the *Financial Times* listing of publications that “count” as top-tier now includes such bridge journals as *Harvard Business Review*, *California Management Review*, *Sloan Management Review*, and *Human Resource Management* (Harzing, 2013). There have been additional factors fostering academic-practitioner compatibility as well. One of these is the development of interpretive (as well as pragmatic and critical) epistemologies that now challenge the supremacy of positivistic epistemologies (Van de Ven, 2007). These “newer” epistemologies have expanded meanings of academic rigor beyond positivistic assumptions, and have opened the door for multiple interpretations of data to be viewed as legitimate (Dipboye, in Press; Mohrman et al., 2001).

Some government initiatives have also fostered compatibility. It was a challenge by the UK government that led to the development of Mode 2 research in the natural sciences, which

was then picked up by Tranfield and Starkey (1998) as a possible path for management research. In the United States, the Bayh-Dole Act of 1980 facilitated a dramatic growth in the number of formal university-industry research partnerships, both in organization studies and in academia more generally (Rynes et al., 2001). In search of faster technological progress, some programs at the National Science Foundation began to require university-corporate collaboration as a condition of funding (Cohen, Florida, Randazzese, & Walsh, 1998).

Yet another likely mechanism affecting the perceived compatibility of academia and practice has been the special forums on the academic-practitioner gap that have appeared in multiple journals with increasing frequency. Two journals, *Administrative Science Quarterly* (1982-1983), followed fifteen years later (1997) by *Journal of Management Inquiry*, published special forums addressing the gap prior to 2000. The number of forums and special issues on the topic has virtually exploded since 2000, including the *Academy of Management Journal* (2001), *British Journal of Management* (2001), *European Management Journal* (2002), *Human Resource Management* (2004), *Journal of Management Studies* (2009), *Journal of Management Inquiry* (2009), *Organization Studies* (2010), *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* (2011), *Journal of Business and Psychology* (2011) *Academy of Management Perspectives* (2012), *Management Learning* (2012), and the *Journal of Business Economics* (2013). Further, the *Academy of Management Journal* published “From the Editors” sections in 2005 and 2007 that included multiple essays exploring academic-practitioner relationships.

Further, new journals have begun that have academic-practitioner links as an explicit focus. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology: Perspectives on Science and Practice*, was launched in 2007 explicitly to incorporate academic-practitioner links. The *Journal of*

Organization Design, an open access journal begun in 2012, has as a mission “to publish theoretical and practical articles on all aspects of organization design”,

<http://orgdesigncomm.com/journal-of-organization-design/>.

Most of the special issues and special forums have emphasized the compatibility of academia and practice. Some, however, (such as the 2009 *Journal of Management Studies*) have had lead articles that emphasize the incompatibility of academia and practice. Thus, depending on which articles are read, special issues may foster perceptions of either the incompatibility or compatibility of academia and practice.

In other words, there is a great deal occurring that fosters views of compatibility, incompatibility, or both, between academics and practitioners. Exploration of the initiatives being taken to foster compatibility or incompatibility can contribute considerably to understanding of dialectical processes and how they have affected the gap over time.

Managing the tensions. What has been largely left out of the discussion is how the tensions are being managed. Seo et al., (2004: 76) suggested multiple ways that such management might occur, including selection, separation, integration, transcendence, and connection. Briefly, *selection* occurs when parties ignore the opposite pole and select one side over the other; *separation* occurs when both poles are recognized but separated temporally, analytically, or topically; *integration* creates a compromise between the poles; *transcendence* (the usual approach associated with dialectics) involves a new synthesis of the poles wherein dualities are transcended, and *connection* (p. 101) “legitimizes dualities through demonstrating respect, empathy, and curiosity for differences. Rather than oscillating between them, unifying them, or merging and transcending dichotomies, connection seeks to embrace differences...

using them to gain insights.”

Our presentation suggests that the modal way that tensions regarding the academic-practitioner gap have been managed is through *selection*, in which one side of the polarity -- compatibility or incompatibility -- is presented as correct, with the other side treated as incorrect. Seo et al. (2004: 76) suggest that selection is the “most typical way that theorists manage contradictions;” “acknowledge(ing) the existence of dualities, but plac(ing) them in a ‘cold war’” relationship that typically favors one side over the other.” With regard to academic-practitioner relationships, the *other* academic tribe (Gulati, 2007) is often denigrated, and practitioners have hardly any role at all.

Our presentation in this essay, in contrast, attempts to create a *connection* between the poles, acknowledging both of them and not taking sides, but demonstrating interest in each perspective. Following Seo et al. (2004), our hope is that by treating the tensions in this way, the differences between them can foster theorizing and research that moves beyond sides.

Paradox

Paradoxical tensions “persist over time” (Smith & Lewis, 2011: 387). Academic-practitioner tensions are interrelated and cyclical, as academics and practitioners interact over time, academics with different perspectives interact with each other, and outside forces exert pressures on the different poles. Further, the compatibility and incompatibility of academics and practitioners and the tensions that express the incompatibilities are each logical when viewed separately, but irrational when juxtaposed. It does not, on the surface, at least, make sense that rigor and relevance can be both compatible and incompatible, yet they are. It does not, on the surface at least, make sense that academics and practitioners can be both compatible and

incompatible, yet they are. Arguments such as those of Mohrman et al. (2001), Amabile et al. (2001) and Rynes et al. (2001) that academics and practitioners are compatible are true. So are arguments such as those of Daft and Lewin (2008) and Kieser and Leiner (2009) that the two groups are incompatible. Being able to hold both sides of these arguments results in sustainability of the tensions in generative ways.

We suggest that academic-practitioner tensions reflect two of the primary categories of paradoxes associated with “core activities and elements of organizations” that Smith and Lewis (2011: 383) have described. These are paradoxes of belonging and performing. Smith and Lewis (p. 383) describe paradoxes associated with *belonging* as driven by complexity and plurality, as individuals and groups “seek both homogeneity and distinction”. They describe paradoxes associated with *performing* (p. 384) as stemming from multiple stakeholders whose differing demands result “in competing strategies and goals.”

The tensions associated with different perceptions of academic-practitioner relationships reflect paradoxes of *belonging* insofar as they identify individuals with membership in a particular group whose understandings of themselves differ from their understandings of other groups. Individuals belong to a group or community of practice that agrees that academics and practitioners are incompatible. Or they belong to a group or community of practice that believes they are compatible. It is often through this belongingness (Gulati, 2007) that individuals gain their identity as scholars or practitioners.

The tensions also reflect paradoxes of *performing*, inasmuch as multiple stakeholder groups have different aims for what academics (and practitioners) should try to accomplish in their work, and academics (and practitioners) may be constantly challenged to accomplish

conflicting aims. Bansal et al. (2012: 84), for example, comment that a reason that the academic-practitioner gap is paradoxical (for academics, at least) is that researchers collaborating with practitioners “are pulled between the contradictory time orientations of practice, which entail rapid responses and sudden changes, and of research, which calls for long periods of uninterrupted deliberation. At the same time, researchers are torn between the imperative to define research problems precisely and investigate them carefully and deeply, and the messy reality of the problems of practice, which require breadth and immediate clarity.” Practitioners will likely not experience the exact same contradictory demands as academics, but they are also likely to experience conflicting demands. Tom Ewart, managing director of the project described by Bansal et al (2012: 79-80), described the opposing demands he experienced while trying to create understandable communication between the participating academics and practitioners and to get academics to “narrow project scopes and avoid” ... “drowning” the research teams.”

The discussion of core paradoxes of organizing suggests the likelihood that the tensions that define the academic-practitioner gap result at least in part from fundamental concerns regarding belonging and performing that are played out in the arena of academic-practitioner relationships. This means that the academic-practitioner gap is unlikely ever to be fully bridged. The particular manifestations of these tensions may evolve, but the tensions are core to organizing itself. Thus, the correct question to ask about paradoxical tensions is how to sustain them successfully (cf. Avenier & Parmentier Cajaiba, 2012), not how to resolve them.

At least one study has empirically explored an approach to sustaining paradoxical tensions. In a collaborative academic-practitioner research paper exploring an action research

intervention at LEGO, Lüscher and Lewis (2008) worked to help managers make sense of a number of complicated issues that had surfaced as a result of a major restructuring. Some of the dilemmas the managers were experiencing concerned whether they should address conflict *or* ignore it in order to get work done, and whether they should direct their employees *or* let the employees gain experience in directing themselves. These dilemmas were identified by the authors as paradoxes of performing. Other dilemmas the managers were experiencing included how they could begin working as a team even if they did not trust the team, and how could they become part of the team while preserving their independence. The authors identified these as paradoxes of belonging (p. 232). By learning to view these quandaries as paradoxical tensions, LEGO managers also learned to “hold” the dilemmas in generative ways, rather than choosing one side and delegitimizing the other. For example, (p. 231) they developed skill in taking “time to deal with conflicts to create more efficient teams over the long run” and sharing their issues “to enable comparisons, allowing the team to form around our individual expressions”. These actions enabled effective action based on connecting the tensions.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

Implications for research

As we noted at the outset, our purpose in this essay has been to lay a paradoxical foundation for research and theorizing regarding academic-practitioner relationships. Our essay has focused on several dimensions of such tensions, dialectics and paradox. Here we suggest several implications for research speaking to each dimension. We will also briefly indicate a few illustrative studies that have addressed each dimension, in hopes that future research will add to the number of such studies.

Tensions. We have fleshed out a number of tensions that specify dimensions of (in)compatibility between academics and practitioners: their logics, time dimensions, communication needs, rigor and relevance, and interests and incentives. This is certainly not a complete list of tensions relating to academic-practitioner relationships. Further, the tensions experienced by one group likely will not be exactly the same as the tensions experienced by another group. As we noted above, some tensions that are very salient to academics might not even be noticed by many practitioners. Thus, one promising research direction is to explore the wide applicability of the tensions we have described and to investigate what other tensions might be involved in academic-practitioner relationships as these are experienced by (groups of) academics and practitioners.

A small number of empirical studies have explored some of the tensions described here. Consistent our discussion of these tensions, the studies have often found somewhat conflicting results. Somewhat consistent with the argument for compatibility, Rynes et al. (1999) found that research conducted by academics within organizations (as opposed to separate from them) was associated with higher academic citation rates. Somewhat consistent with the argument for incompatibility, Beech et al. (2010) explored reasons why dialogs between academics and practitioners are often problematic. Through a variety of archival and observational data collection methods the authors learned that there were different underlying assumptions between the two groups (e.g. about hierarchy, mono-directional communication and so forth) that mitigated against effective dialog.

In addition, a small number of studies have explored possible relationships between rigor and relevance. Supporting their potential compatibility, Baldrige, Floyd, and Markóczy (2004)

collected data from six leading management journals, and found small but positive correlations between academic citations and an expert practitioner panel's ratings of practical relevance. Supporting incompatibility, Nicolai, Schultz, and Göbel (2011) studied the similarity between academics' and practitioners' ratings of articles submitted to an academic journal. They found that academics' and practitioners' recommendations regarding whether to publish submissions were inversely related. Further, practitioners' perceptions of an article's practical relevance were incompatible with academics' assessments of rigor.

Dialectics. We have described several factors that have fostered tensions related to academic-practitioner relationships over the past half century, starting with emphases on academic rigor in the 1950s and expanding through government pressures for relevance in recent years. These types of pressures are rarely studied with regard to academic-practitioner relationships, but exploration of them and the types of shifts they have helped to evoke over time can add considerably to the understanding of such tensions.

One model for a study based on dialectics might be to encourage, instead of the more typical "debates" concerning conflicting academic points of view (e.g., Morgeson, Campion, Dipboye, Hollenbeck, Murphy, & Schmitt, 2007 versus Ones, Dilchert, Viswesvaran, & Judge, 2007), joint forums where different groups elaborate their points of *agreement* as avenues for possible new "theses" and collect data related to them. Such an approach was modeled by Latham, Erez and Locke (1988) with regard to inconsistent findings about the importance of participation in goal setting.

There has been very little empirical study of dialectics associated with academic-practitioner relationships. However, Swan et al (2010) conducted a longitudinal field study of

Mode 1 and Mode 2 as competing institutional logics (Thornton, Ocasio & Lounsbury, 2012) associated with the policy intervention in the UK aimed at promoting Mode 2 knowledge production in genetics research. They traced the dialectical processes that occurred within the scientific community both within groups advocating for Mode 1 or Mode 2 and across these groups over several years. The groups included “distributed set of actors and interests, including professionals not commonly associated with biomedical science (social scientists, ethicists and lawyers) (p. 1332).” Swan et al.’s (2010) research showed that government efforts to introduce Mode 2 research in the natural sciences generated, over time, multiple contradictions that ended up leading back to an emphasis on Mode 1 approaches to science in the field of genetics.

This study models the type of research that might be done exploring the “distributed set(s) of actors and interests” that influence the evolution of academic–practitioner relationships, how much influence they have at any one time, and how this influence is exerted. Such research will undoubtedly uncover multiple additional influencing actors, and can lead to broader investigations of dialectical processes associated with multiple aspects of academic-practitioner relationships over time.

Paradox. Finally, we have suggested that academic-practitioner tensions are paradoxical, and, thus, how these tensions are managed is important for effective action. It would be particularly valuable for studies to explore other ways of managing the paradoxical tensions associated with academic-practitioner relationships than selection strategies that support one side and denigrate the other (Seo et al., 2004).

For example, some research suggests the value of reframing paradoxical tensions as issues to engage rather than solve (Bartunek, 1988; Gilbert, 2006), perhaps by using humor or

irony to embrace tensions (Hatch & Ehrlich, 1993). Other studies describe rhetorical strategies managers can use to enable employees to focus on apparently conflicting goals in sequence (Ethiraj & Levinthal, 1009; Jarzabkowski & Sillince, 2007). Smith and Tushman (2005) suggest differentiating processes at one organizational level and integrating processes at another that may sustain both poles of a tension.

There has been very little empirical study of paradox in regard to academic-practitioner relationships. But a recent study by Empson (2013), while not using the term “paradox”, provides a particularly good example of both experiencing and sustaining paradoxical tensions. Empson (2013) was an investment banker and strategy consultant prior to entering academia. She became an academic, but found that the world of professional services practice remained important to her. Using an autoethnographic methodology, Empson studied the intense identity conflict that she experienced as she developed growing interest in practitioners’ concerns as a result of her ongoing engagement with them over the course of her academic work. She identified factors such as the strength of her identification with academia, the attractiveness of a practice identity, and the perceived incommensurability between the two that led to tension and conflict between her work identities accompanied by feelings of excitement, enjoyment, affirmation, guilt and confusion.

Empson also described ways she learned to sustain this identity conflict by finding a peer group that accepted her approach and by focusing her “energies on research and teaching about professional service firms” (p. 243). As a result, Empson came to (p. 244): “realize that my dual work identities of researcher and practitioner are not incommensurable but can coexist in dialectical tension. This tension cannot be resolved, but it can be recognized, understood, and

accommodated.... I have expanded my conceptualization of my academic identity to accommodate this dialectic which in effect forms a central theme of my identity narrative. However, my dual work identities of researcher and practitioner must be carefully managed to maintain the appropriate degree of tension". In other words, the tensions, dialectics and paradoxical elements we have discussed provide a foundation for research that stems from a sophisticated understanding of the academic-practitioner gap. Our essay is only a start to such research, but one that can shift focus away from viewing the gap as divisive to appreciating the multiple types of dynamic tensions it embodies.

Implications for Academic Practice

The timing of our paper is important. This is especially true with respect to contemporary forces affecting dialectic processes associated with academic-practitioner relationships. As we have indicated, these relationships are not separate from larger political forces. The Research Excellence Framework in the United Kingdom is one important example. With its recent change away from a Research Assessment Exercise based almost entirely on scholarly impact to a research excellence framework (<http://www.ref.ac.uk/>) that explicitly includes the impact of the research on practice as a way of assessing scholarly outputs, the UK government is playing a role in the ongoing academic-practitioner dialectic.

In the United States and other countries there is a growing dependence of higher education (including schools of management) on private monies. As public support for education continues to decline, universities are ever-more dependent on the private sector for continued survival (Heckscher & Martin-Rios, 2013; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). Such environments foster assumptions – or at least hope -- that academia and practice are compatible. Yet the expanding

importance of ranking systems continues to give different messages, that academia and practice are incompatible and that scholarly rigor is all that matters (e.g. Bergh, Perry & Hanke, 2006; Flickinger et al., 2013; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Bachrach & Podsakoff, 2005).

In other words, this is a time when contradictions regarding dimensions of academic-practitioner relationships are particularly salient. Thus, it provides a particularly good opportunity for academics, perhaps following Empson's example (2013: 244), to reflect on the tensions we are experiencing in this domain, and, consider what we need to do to "maintain the appropriate degree of tension" as opposed to trying (unsuccessfully) to resolve the gap.

Advantages of these approaches for academic relationships with practitioners

One benefit of our approach may be in opening up discussions about the academic-practitioner gap beyond groups of academics to include practitioners more fully. This includes recognizing the possibility that practitioners' experiences and interpretations may be radically different than the ways that academics often cast these interpretations. As John Austin commented:

I wonder if belonging is more important to academics. This thought was triggered when I read the sentence about gaining an identity as scholars or practitioners. It occurs to me that I don't think I have met an executive who identifies as a practitioner. In fact, I don't think I've met many consultants who identify as practitioners. I am not sure the term practitioner represents an identity in any way the same way that a scholar represents an identity. What is the implication if one side of the divide views their location vis-à-vis the divide as an identity but the other side does not?

In other words, attending to the experience of “practitioners”, regardless of whether they label themselves as that, may considerably expand academic understandings of and approaches to the paradoxical tensions associated with academic-practitioner relationships. By more fully including practitioners in examination of these tensions, we can ensure that we are studying true academic-practitioner paradoxes rather than paradoxes as perceived (only) by academics (Caprar, Kim & Rynes, 2010).

Further, in holding the practitioner pole in tension with the academic one, we elevate it to a more equal status than is often the case. Academics have been known to “talk down to” (or more accurately, “at”) practitioners (e.g., Hanson, 2002; Trank, 2013) rather than engaging in an equal exchange. As Beech et al. (2010) illustrate, talking down is far more likely when practitioners are just visions of our social constructions rather than real people sitting at the same table. But academics who more fully engage the tensions of research and practice will increase the chances of finding something truly new and interesting, and at the same time, increasing academic citations and the likelihood of producing highly influential research (Bansal et al., 2012; Berry, 1995; Bartunek, Rynes, and Ireland, 2006; Campbell et al., 1982; Rynes et al. 1999; Rynes, 2012; Schein, 2010; Van de Ven, 2007).

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

We (the authors) are very good friends. We have collaborated on research projects multiple times over the past 15 years. We expected that collaborating on this essay would go as smoothly as our other joint projects have gone. But somehow this particular collaboration was different. We discovered that we had very different ideas of what the essay should be about. As a result, it has gone through wildly varying drafts, with frequent disagreements about emphasis.

These disagreements produced several impasses that delayed the final product and at one juncture threatened to unravel our friendship. In the end, it was mostly our desire to preserve our friendship and learn from the tensions we were experiencing that kept us struggling with the paper. We reminded ourselves that we were sitting on the same side of the table as we critiqued each other's drafts.

This deep (inter)personal experience has heightened our awareness of the depth of the tensions associated with academic-practitioner -- and academic-academic -- relationships. It has made us painfully aware that such tensions are not only intellectual puzzles, but strike at the core of many peoples' (especially scholars') understandings of their work. As our friendly reviewers (and earlier, Bartunek, 2007; Schein, 1969) and others (e.g., Amabile et al., 2001) have noted, relationships can be crucial for fostering joint work that benefits from engaging tensions. We hope that this essay, the result of how we have dealt with our own tensions, is generative for research and theorizing about a very complex and important issue that touches us all.

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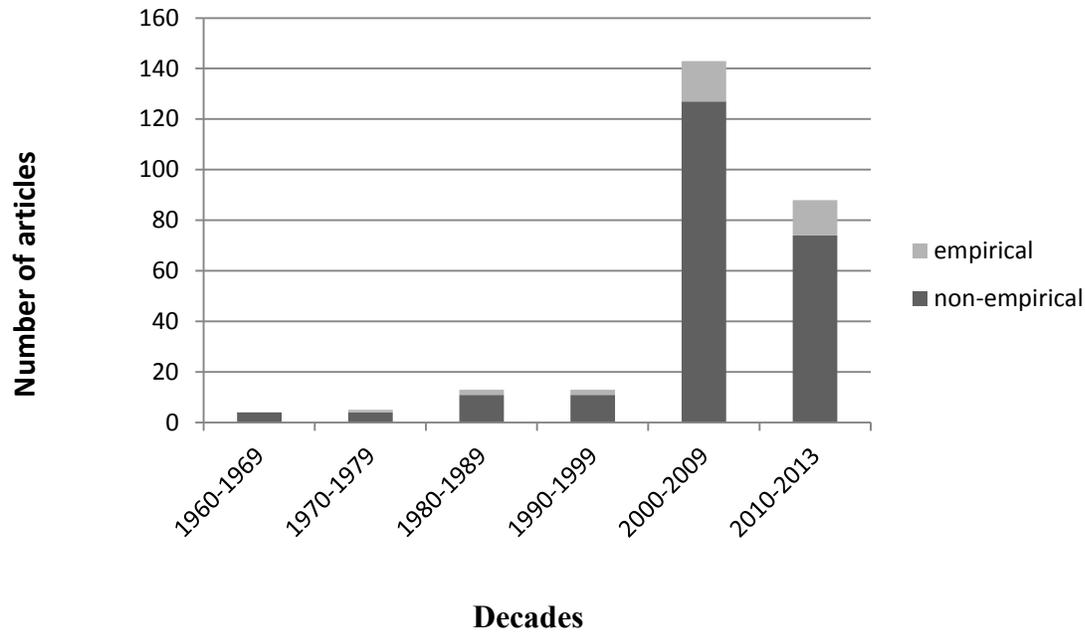
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ONLINE SUPPLEMENTAL APPENDIX

Numbers of (empirical and non-empirical) articles addressing academic-practitioner relationships appearing in ten-year time blocks from 1960 through September 2013



Sample of Impactful Books and Articles Addressing Gaps Between Academic Research and Management Practice over the last Half-Century

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