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Collaborative for Whom? A Methodological Critique of Academic-practitioner

Collaborative Research Practices

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Abstract:

This methodological note highlights a number of key issues emerged from academic-practitioner collaborative research practices. It is suggested that the choice of research methodology with its impact on researchers and practitioners fundamentally contributes to these key issues. We argue that, in order to make research relevant and meaningful for those in practice, researchers shall consider: (1) letting their research focus emerge through their engagement with practitioners; (2) conceptualising their research problem as the problem facing practitioners; and (3) viewing their research as a representation of business practices across time, people and place.

Key words: academic-practitioner collaborative research; grounded theory; research methodology; research relevance and rigour

Paper type: methodological note

It is understood that academic-practitioner collaborative research practices may employ different methodological approaches (e.g. grounded theory, case study, action research) and involve different issues (e.g. protection of intellectual properties, Slowinski & Zerby, 2008; relational scholarship versus division of labour in collaborative research, Bartunek, 2007; Mauthner & Doucet, 2008; collaborative research between subject groups, Parente, Lee, Ishman & Roth, 2008; university-industry collaboration; Perkmann & Walsh, 2007). Our core interests in academic-practitioners collaborative research practices, thus the thesis of our essay lies at how academic researchers can conduct their research that is relevant to practitioners, at the very same time, not compromise the methodological rigour.

We could like to begin by presenting two different voices, one from a practitioner, another from an academic researcher. In a recent professional gathering, a management practitioner spoke about the reality of academic-practitioner collaboration. He made a comment later in an email exchange and highlighted his perception of the lack of specific problems for collaboration:

> "I am aware that many organisations are trying to create (i.e. have money available) improved links between industry and academia but without an idea of the specific problems to look for…" (a management practitioner, personal comm.)

Another voice came from an academic researcher – Dick Wittink, who spoke about the wide-spread divergence between academic research and management practice:

"There is increasing concern regarding the possible divergence between the research done by academics and the problems faced by managers. One aspect of this divergence is that executives voice concerns regarding the relevance of academic research for important industry problems. This complex problem has many contributing factors and it will be difficult, if not impossible, to resolve all of the underlying concerns…" (McAlister, 2006)

These two voices may not be representative across both communities, they are nevertheless indicative of concerns expressed by practitioners with regards to the relevance of academic research. Both academic researchers and practitioners are all familiar with this "disconnect" between the needs of business and academic communities (Hinkin, Holtom & Klag, 2007). In the case of academic research, some researchers claiming to be doing relevant, grounded research have not indeed sufficiently addressed this issue of non-relevance or lack of relevance.

Having registered these two different voices as part of the scene-setting, we could like to further discuss the "disconnect" mentioned above from a methodological point of view. The methodological response discussed in this paper is known as "grounded theory" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), a fully-fledged methodology (McCallin, 2003) which has been used in various academic disciplines (Glaser, 1992). The concerns of grounded theory research are of those being researched, rather than the researcher (Glaser, 1978). Researchers begin their research from an area of interests containing life cycle interest, not a pre-conceived problem (Glaser, 1992). The focus of grounded theory study, as opposed to pre-defined at the beginning of a study, emerges from a

set of rigorous methodological procedures in grounded theory such as open coding, selective coding, constant comparison, theoretical sampling and so on (Glaser, 1992).

Given that grounded theory is a methodology on its own; its criteria for judging grounded theory are different from its methodological counterparts. The set of criteria is: fit, workability, relevance and modifiability (Glaser, 1978). Central to academic-practitioner collaborative research practices in this paper, we would like to highlight the criterion of relevance and urge more research to be conducted with the aim of understanding how research participants continually resolve their concerns (Glaser, 1978). By abstractly conceptualising the process of continual resolution of practitioners' concerns, academic researchers are then able to generate a perspective of perspectives (Glaser, 2001). The significance of researcher's perspective of other perspectives (including for example, other researchers and research participants in a variety of forms) is that his or her perspective is abstract and independent of the parameters of time, place and people (Glaser, 2003). This also suggests that the researcher is capable of elevating his/herself from the immediate context of practitioners whom s/he deals with, seeing concerns and their resolutions across time, place and people (Glaser, 2003), and generating an abstract perspective. Practitioners are then equipped with such an abstract perspective offered by the researcher and use it as a point of reference in their behaviour. It is also emphasising that the researcher's perspective of perspectives do not stand still: it evolves given the passage of time and any new data the researcher may be exposed to. Perspectives or theories generated from one substantive area can also be compared with their counterparts in other substantive areas towards the generation of a formal grounded theory – "a theory of substantive grounded theory core category's general implications generated from, as

wide as possible, other data and studies in the same substantive area and in other substantive areas" (Glaser, 2007, p.4). On the other hand, a substantive grounded theory is "grounded in research in one particular substantive area, it might be taken to apply only to that specific area" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 79).

From a grounded theory point of view, the priority of academic-practitioner collaborative research practices should be given the concerns of practitioners (i.e. research participants) and how they continually resolve their concerns in practice. The job of grounded theory researchers is mainly to provide the practitioners an abstract perspective which is generated on the basis of other perspectives. The grounded theory researchers' perspective is of course, highly relevant to the concerns and problems faced by the practitioners. Therefore, it is argued in this paper that, academic-practitioner collaborative research practices should put the concerns of practitioners first by tapping into the very concerns and their resolution of practitioners. Academic researcher's area of interests is, as it goes without saying, is vital in generating a perspective of perspectives. But, one should not confuse between researcher's area of interests and practitioner's concerns, problems and their resolution. In other words, academic researchers do not have their own research problems; they research into the problems of practitioners.

This priority given to addressing practitioners' concerns over those of academic researchers' own also has enormous implications concerning how academic researchers are methodologically trained in academic institutions. It is felt that at the present moment, most if not all of the training in the area of research methodology are directed towards the latter – the professional concerns of academic researchers. They

are often manifested at the start of one's research in the forms of for example, research focus, problem and questions, regardless of the concerns of research participants and their resolution. Doing what is relevant for practitioners also requires the researchers to resist pressures from the academic research community. As suggested elsewhere (Fei, 2007), doing academic research is very much a character building exercise and not at all about pleasing someone.

Some academic colleagues may argue that their methodological approaches to research and teaching are relevant to the practitioners and their students, rigorous in demonstrating how one's research is conducted at each and every step during the research process, and have the built-in features in his or her chosen methodology to constantly compare with any new data. As all research is 'grounded' in practice in one way or another (Glaser, 1992), one's research and teaching 'grounded' in practice does not mean the same thing as 'grounded theory'. The everyday use of the word 'grounded', sometimes being used in a loose or opportunistic way, should not lose sight of the methodological rigour and relevance as espoused in grounded theory. The latter – grounded theory is a fully-fledged research methodology embedded with a whole body of scholarly orientations and attitudes (Cole, 2006).

We would like to conclude at this point, that grounded theory is just one of the ways of doing research. As Glaser (1978) puts it, "our perspective is but a piece of a myriad of action in Sociology, not the only, right action" (p. 3). Nevertheless, we hope that we have had shed some light, from a methodological perspective, on issues concerning research relevance and rigour in academic-practitioner collaborative research practices. It is also our intention that our discussions contained in this

methodological note will serve as an invitation for both the academic research community and the world of practitioners to join us in doing relevant and rigorous research together.

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