

Societal progress: A tale of two brothers

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Editorial

The story of societal progress has long been acknowledged to involve two brothers - management research and management practice (Beyer, 1982). Although, reared by the same knowledge core (Poole and Van de Ven, 1989; Wallin and von Krogh, 2010), the brothers in a display of their contrasting lives behave independently, often disparately. Their distinct behaviour has prompted scholars to report that 'most of what management researchers do utterly fails to resonate with management practice' (Bansal et al., 2012, p. 73). Those observing the relationship unfold have been concerned of this disconnect for decades (Banks et al., 2016; Hambrick, 1994; Shapiro, Kirkman and Courtney, 2007). Gordon and Howell (1959) posited that universities and business schools need to be 'better informed and more scholarly faculties that are capable of carrying on more significant research, and with greater appreciation of the contributions to be made to the development of business competence' (p.425). Fast forward nearly 60 years and not much seems to have changed. Banks et al. (2016) in a survey conducted with 1700 academics and practitioners found that information asymmetry and goal incongruence has continued to widen the research-practice gap. This resonates with those who have described management research as 'arcane' (Walsh et al., 2007) with its relationship to practice as mostly 'ceremonial' (Bartunek and Rynes, 2010), where others have called the brewing brotherhood a harmful coalition (Ghosal, 2005). Their relational disparity and discontent has also become a media sensation with leading sources such as the Financial Times and the Economist calling on business school administrators (Schiller, 2011) who are seen to favour one brother (i.e. research) and paying little attention to the other (i.e. practice). Yet, much of the focus (and blame) has been on how research does not apply judicious methods and materials to engage with practice with little commentary on practice's intention to engage and adopt research's outputs (Dunbar and Bresser, 2014; Walsh et al., 2007). Once again, the attention is on nurture rather than nature. Where did the nurturing

go wrong and how can we get the two seemingly important members of societal progress behave in-sync again has been the question of many virtuous scholars attempting to identify and bridge the so-called "gap" (Austin & Bartunek, 2012; Banks et al., 2016; Bansal et al., 2012; Cascio & Aguinis, 2008; Dipboye, 2007; Empson, 2013). Yet, the disconnect seems to be increasing (Tsui, 2013).

So for a moment, let's think differently. Could it be that there is no problem with the nurturing, rather the perspective by which we are evaluating the brothers? Tell me if you have ever seen two brothers who continuously thrive to behave in-sync. While the recognition that the brothers are intertwined is useful, it is even more important to treat them independently. The focus then need not be on who is being favoured and who is getting less attention, rather the debate rests in understanding that both brothers are unique in their functions and personalities, destined to behave differently and achieve mostly differing goals in life. With such a purview, joyous Christmas homecomings (i.e. research translation to practice) can be best enacted by understanding the tensions between them and new knowledge worthy of conversations that these vary tensions create - unlocking the paradoxes of their relationship (Bartunek and Rynes, 2014).

In reality, the ambitious vision of research begins to take form at the point of design and follows through data collection to findings of the organisational world. The scientific process of repetition and re-testing eventually leads to new knowledge and perspectives of seeing the world. This new knowledge when shared becomes the basis of intervention and action for societal change and progress. Change and progress then produce new sets of data and, the cycle continues. However, at some points in this scientific lifecycle there emerges disconnect and dilemmas (Dipboye, 2007). Dilemmas are different from disconnect. Disconnect tends to focus on the "gap", that is they refer to what ought to be and what actual is. Dilemmas on the other hand involve trade-offs between alternatives but none of the alternatives is assumed to be superior to the other and where one is expected to behave in a certain way but there is an incentive to not to (Keeney and Raiffa, 1993). The research scientist is expected to embrace the real-world uncertainties but is incentivised to deliver simplified, controlled and methodologically rigorous outputs to explain the phenomenon under assumptions. The practitioners on the other hand have to operate and enact amongst uncertainties and complexities of the real-world where leverage of assumptions can result in disastrous outcomes. Arguably, a research scientist has the tools and time to subscribe to the view that knowledge is objective, often factual and carries dispassionate truth (Geelan and Hirschkom, 2008). Whereas the mindsets of the practitioners reflect the view that knowledge is often biased, incomplete, influenced by self-serving tendencies and potentially compromised to attain a competitive advantage (Geelan and Hirschkom, 2008). Where specialised terminology and definitions seem to interest the research scholars, the practitioners tend to rely on past experience, heuristics and gut-feeling to advance society (Dipboye, 2007). Clearly, research and practice have unique characteristics and apply a different frame of reference to make sense of the world (Johns, 1993). Is it not better than to harness the effectiveness of two? And an even more provoking thought is - should we ever consider research without a clear focus on practice or practice without a definitive understanding of research in the discourse? - We say research and practice must go hand-in-hand if societal progress is to be realised.

The scientific approach of a researcher can help generate predictive models and solutions to explore and explain the relationships and effects of various conditions on the factor of concern. The practice view embedded in a discursive, conversational and dialectic approach can high-

light the contradictions and complexities of the real world. Collectively, the two can unlock the probabilities of success in choosing (or deviating) between one dilemma or the other, taking into account the fuzzy basis and theoretical grounding for action. More than 20 years ago, Hammond (1996) posited that 'common-sense will bring imperfect reasoning, inconsistency, conflict, and inevitably, error, with its attendant injustices', yet 'quasi-rationality emerges as a valuable form of cognition because it tries to avoid the irresponsibility of intuition as well as the fragility of analysis' (p. 353). Our argument is in the same vein, knowledge creation, process and development involves a social process and societal progress requires some common understanding of the knowledge paradigms. However, we may differ from others in the view that evolutionary process of knowledge management requires one to occasionally depart from the norms and sanctions bounded by accepted forms of rigour and standards to then make a contribution towards creative outputs and innovation. Only through a collective approach which embraces research and practice can there be sufficient monogamy and fuzzy thinking to paint the current societal picture and there-in unveil ways to improve without creating despair.

So how to do we do that? We believe there are at least four actionable items to improve the brotherhood:

1. Champion insights - this involves building a culture within the universities and industrial organisations of openness and acceptance of knowledge flows across boundaries. For practitioners this many involve - (a) better access to research outputs in the language understandable by them, (b) better skills in interpreting the implications of research findings to their practice and, (c) better skills in harnessing the opportunities to improve or change based on the leading research concerning factors which may affect sustainability of the firm. For research scientist this may involve development of - (a) better skills and opportunities to explain specificities and complexities of the research design and findings in a simpler manner in outlets read by those outside academia, (b) better skills, technologies and avenues to collate research in a discipline, decipher it to make sense in particular contexts and convey the research message in an educational setting.
2. Foster leadership - this requires a focus on developing current and emerging leaders in terms of their capabilities to engage with research and practice simultaneously through contemporary means (i.e. micro credentials, summer schools, internal scholar development programs). Importantly, this requires research to be less generalised and be more context rich, sufficiently complex to embrace the challenges and uncertainties of the real-world. It may mean greater emphasis on co-development of multi-disciplinary research projects through university-industry cooperation - the so called 'industrial doctoral programs' rather than the traditional approach fostered within disciplinary silos.
3. Develop a broker - It can be reasonably assumed that research and practice will continue to go about their separate lives, and changing the course of their behaviour will take a long time as it demands a shift in patterns of skills, knowledge, systems, structures, interests and incentives. Thus a role exists for a broker. The broker can act as a match-maker across the quadruple helix (university-industry-government-society), responsible for excellence across all stages of research translation. The broker could be a one or a group of people who have or can adapt to both practitioner and academic behaviours and etymologies and hence are able to effectively process, develop and transfer knowledge across research and practice. The broker's role can be seen as critical for linking industry problems to research

projects, catalysing the dialogue for solving wicked challenges through effective integration of research findings to practice and timely transfer of practitioner challenges and concern to research design.

4. Evoke the brotherhood - and thus spark action. This would involve ways in which research and practice can be challenged but also shown the unique advantages of working in harmony to strengthen the brotherhood. Pragmatically, this means development of shared knowledge, be via unique datasets to facilitate evidence-based decision-making in practice or via road mapping and forecasting to guide research-intensive activities.

To conclude, our call is to avoid a situation in innovation management like what Polkinhorne (1992) claimed of psychological science becoming irrelevant to psychology practice or what led Diboye (2007) to make eight outrageous statements on the state of human resource science and practice and what provoked Bansal and colleagues (2012) to lead a symposium at the Academy of Management after repeated unanswered calls for embracing research and practice as two brothers-in-arms necessary for societal progress.

Yours innovatively,

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Editors

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Cite paper as: Mention, A., Pinto Ferreira, J.J., Torkkeli, M., (2018). Societal progress: A tale of two brothers - Editorial, *Journal of Innovation Management*, www.open-jim.org, 6(2), 1-5. <http://hdl.handle.net/10216/113222>