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**ORGANIZATION STUDIES AS APPLIED  
SCIENCE:  
THE GENERATION AND USE OF ACADEMIC  
KNOWLEDGE ABOUT ORGANIZATIONS  
INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE**

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**Organization Studies as Applied Science:**  
**The Generation and Use of Academic Knowledge about Organizations**  
**Introduction to the Special Issue**

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## **Organization Studies as Applied Science:**

### **The Generation and Use of Academic Knowledge about Organizations**

#### **Introduction to the Special Issue**

##### **Abstract**

The relationship between theory and practice has been discussed in the social sciences for generations. Academics from management and organization studies regularly lament the divide between theory and practice. They regret the insufficient academic knowledge of managerial problems and their solutions, and criticize the scholarly production of theories that are not relevant for organizational practice (Hambrick 1994). Despite the prevalence of this topic in academic discourse we do not know much about what kind of academic knowledge would be useful to practice, how it would be produced, and how the transfer of knowledge between theory and practice actually works. In short, we do not know how we can make academic work more relevant for practice or even whether this would be desirable. In this introduction to the special issue we apply philosophical, theoretical, and empirical perspectives to examine the challenges of studying the generation and use of academic knowledge. We then briefly describe the contribution of the seven papers that were selected for this special issue. Finally, we discuss issues that still need to be addressed, and make some proposals for future avenues of research.

##### **Introduction**

The academic community has long been concerned about the nature of knowledge produced in management and organization theory and its application to practice. Whilst

academic management knowledge is not produced in a vacuum, as it often arises from the study of management problems and issues, academic, theory-driven generation and testing of knowledge and management practice have canonically been seen as separate endeavours. While academics are usually concerned with methodological rigor managers seek the practical relevance of knowledge. These concerns, which are grounded in the different ways in which knowledge is produced and consumed by management academics and by practising managers, are reflected in the wider social science domain. For example, Pelz (1978) suggests that social scientific knowledge lends itself to three different types of use in practice: instrumental, conceptual, and symbolic. Instrumental use is the direct application of theory to practice, suggesting a clear link between theoretical principles and their relevance to practical action. Conceptual use highlights the role of theoretical knowledge in providing a way to think about or represent the practical world that does not imply a direct correlation between theoretical principles and practical action. Symbolic use highlights the political nature of knowledge and its potential adoption in order to legitimize preferred practical action, frequently in ceremonial ways that do not imply any corresponding commitment to applying theory in practice. Most of the early treatments of the relationship between academic theory and practical action made the ontological assumption that academic theory provides a precedent for practical action. That is, that academic theory provides a sufficient representation of the practical world that it may be consumed by practitioners in instrumental (direct application to action), conceptual (thinking prior to action) or symbolic (justification of action) ways.

More recently, some studies conceptualize the social production of knowledge from a different ontological basis. They explain two different modes and purposes of knowledge production and consumption in academic and practical communities, referred to as Mode 1

and Mode 2 (Gibbons et al. 1994). Mode 1 knowledge production is the traditional, disciplinary-based form of knowledge production and consumption inside universities and academic communities, which tend to have relatively homogeneous views of what constitutes appropriate forms of knowledge. Mode 2 deals with knowledge production and consumption in the wider social domain, drawing upon and applied to the solving of practical problems. Knowledge production occurs in cross-disciplinary, heterogeneous communities from a range of organizations, not only universities. We may thus understand Mode 2 knowledge as arising from the co-production of knowledge between multiple groups in society, including universities, which have different objectives and needs in the consumption of that knowledge.

The articulation of these quite different concepts of the social sciences has fuelled further debate in the management and organization community about the relevance of management theory to policy and practice (e.g., Kieser and Leiner 2009; Lawler et al. 1999; Rhynes et al. 2001; Rhynes and Shapiro 2005; Starbuck 2007; Starkey and Madan 2001). Some scholars question whether increased connection between academic research and practice requires joint research to increase relevance (Bartunek 2007). Perhaps better communication and understanding between these two groups will bridge the gap. Building an evidence base for knowledge arising from academic findings may make it more likely that practitioners will apply academic knowledge (Rousseau 2006; Rousseau et al. 2008). Increasingly, however, there are voices calling for management scholars to develop research designs that can operationalize the relationship between management knowledge and practical action empirically (Shani et al. 2008; Van de Ven 2007). For example, research councils fund research that incorporates practitioners in the design of the research, not only in the dissemination of its results<sup>1</sup>. The development of professional doctorate programs and busi-

ness school reforms are discussed (Huff and Huff 2001) as approaches to satisfy the knowledge production and consumption needs of practising professionals. While much existing empirical research is based on ontological assumptions that academic knowledge precedes practical action, for example examining the extent to which current academic knowledge is relevant to practice, increasingly research is being designed with specific regard for the nature and objectives of co-produced knowledge and the different ways that it is consumed by different audiences.

This Special Issue (SI) seeks to contribute new understandings of the relationship between academic theory and practical action and to address the different assumptions underlying knowledge production and consumption. The SI arises from the Third *Organization Studies* Summer Workshop, 7-9 June 2007, Crete, Greece, a conference that attracted 90 academics interested in this topic. SI submissions came from workshop participants and from other scholars who did not attend the Crete event. We invited both theoretical and empirical papers and asked for original ideas, rigorous analyses, and novel approaches. Of the 33 submissions, after several rounds of reviews and revisions, we are happy that the seven papers that appear in this special issue provide diverse and rich perspectives that will help move the relevance debate forward. Our experience of organizing the conference and editing this issue has greatly impacted our own understandings of the topic. Before we briefly introduce into the articles, we will share some general observations on what we consider the most important challenges for the generation and use of academic knowledge in organizational practice.

## **The Generation and Use of Academic Knowledge about Organizations: Challenges for Organizations Studies**

The generation and use of academic knowledge poses challenges on various levels of analysis. There are fundamental issues that reflect *philosophical challenges* such as the appropriate definition of the concepts of knowledge and theory and their systematic relationship with action and practice. The application of knowledge also raises related ethical issues and the question of whose interests should be served in practice. These issues influence how we approach the task to develop knowledge that is useful for practice. *Theoretical challenges* deal with the development of theory on the generation, transfer, and use of knowledge. And finally *empirical challenges* pose problems about how empirical investigation and analysis can actually be conducted.

### ***Philosophical Challenges: The Relationship between Theory and Practice***

The relationship between knowledge and action or theory and practice has been a matter of debate in philosophy and the philosophy of science for generations. In this debate social philosophers and students of the social sciences hold incommensurable views on the characteristics of the object of study (ontology), how knowledge about the objects of study can be perceived (epistemology), and which research interests should be pursued (ethics). As a consequence the role of social and organizational scholarship is highly contested (Burrell and Morgan 1979; Scherer 1998, 2003). At issue is how the concepts of knowledge and theory should be defined (Spender and Scherer 2007; Tsoukas 1994). Also at issue is whether theory precedes practice or practice is methodologically prior, and associated implications for systematic linkage between knowledge and action (Scherer and Steinmann

1999): Do we need knowledge in order to act successfully, and if so where does knowledge come from? Or is successful action constitutive for knowledge, and if so how is it possible to act successfully in the first place without having *a-priori* knowledge?

According to the conventional wisdom of the positivist social sciences, i.e. the dominant model of the social sciences that applies the natural science model to the study of social phenomena, practice is conceived of merely as the application of theory (Donaldson 1996). Seen from this perspective any observable social phenomena can in principle be explained with the help of theories that make explicit the law-like cause and effect relationships that underlie any social and natural occurrences (Scherer 2003). When these theories are applied in practice, managers become capable not only of explaining organizational phenomena, but also of predicting behavior and of controlling organizations. This leads to the assumption “that *all* appropriate organizational activity is the result of conscious thought” as Spender (1995: 154, emphasis added) has critically remarked. Seen from this perspective knowledge precedes action and thus theory is constitutive for practice. However, this leads to the problem of how knowledge can be developed and how theory can be justified at all (Scherer and Steinmann 1999; Spender and Scherer 2007).

A deductive concept of reasoning will not resolve this justification problem. To reason deductively means to derive an assertion A from a premise B through logical conclusion  $B \Rightarrow A$ . If one questions the basis of reasoning, i.e. either the premise B or the logical conclusion  $B \Rightarrow A$ , then a new basis for reasoning (e.g., C) must be given from where the questioned basis can be derived logically (e.g.,  $C \Rightarrow B$ ). However, this will not resolve the reasoning problem, but will lead to the trilemma of infinite regress, circle, or dogma (Albert 1985, 1988), as every new basis can either be questioned again (infinite regress, e.g.,  $D \Rightarrow C$ ,  $E \Rightarrow$



D,  $F \Rightarrow E$  etc.), or is supported by premises that are already questioned (circle, e.g.,  $A \Rightarrow C$ ) or is based on dogmatic assertions (e.g., C!).

In philosophy, however, there is also a strong tradition of idealism, phenomenology, hermeneutics, and constructivism that suggests a different view on the relationship between knowledge and action (Steffy and Grimes 1985; Scherer and Steinmann 1999; Tsoukas 1996; Yanow and Tsoukas 2009). According to this view, action methodologically precedes knowledge. Wilhelm Dilthey (1926), for example, maintains that knowledge cannot go beyond life. He suggests that there is no external point outside the social world from which life can be understood. Rather, life itself represents the beginning of and reference point for the development of knowledge and the construction of theory. Edmund Husserl (1936) further extends these ideas and develops the concept of life-world ("*Lebenswelt*"). This concept is used to describe the part of everyday life where ordinary people are engaged with and control activities and occurrences without any theoretical reflection. Husserl considers life-world as the primary source from which human beings derive meaning and become experienced at interacting with their social and natural environment. Only with the help of this practical experience and know-how of coping with the world do they become able to develop theories about the understanding of social and natural phenomena. Likewise, Martin Heidegger (1927) and Hans-Georg Gadamer (1960) emphasize the role of the context in which social activities are embedded and from where individuals make sense of their actions and utterances. Both philosophers suggest that meaning cannot be perceived objectively and directly, but is influenced by the social practices and traditions in which the interpreter is embedded (see, e.g., Chia and Holt 2006, 2008). Based on these insights constructivism draws the conclusion that the construction of knowledge is rooted in practice and the development of theory has to be reconstructed as a systematic extension of practice (Scherer and Steinmann

1999): "Theory arises out of practice and the first theoretical steps must be rooted in practice." (Sagal 1987: 176)

Aside from these ontological and epistemological questions the development and application of knowledge and theories also poses ethical challenges in as much as academics have to reflect on the interests that are served by their theories and their influence on practice (Steffy and Grimes 1985; Scherer 2009; Willmott 2003). Who is the addressee of academic insight and theoretical support? Should academics support the interests of powerful firm owners and managers or those who are powerless and marginalized? Obviously, academic knowledge that is relevant influences the power balance in organizational practice. At best the engagement of academics with practice may lead to the resolution of conflicts in management practice and the development of just organizations, at worst it may cement social imbalances and the marginalization of powerless groups.

### ***Theoretical Challenges of Taking Practice Seriously***

If we seriously address the view that everyday life is the primary source from which human beings derive meaning and develop theories about their experiences (Husserl 1936), we must accept some challenges to the way we think about existing management theories. Essentially, if practitioners derive meaning from their everyday work practice, we need to rethink the way that we conceptualize the relevance debate, which is dominated by linear, representationalist arguments about the relationship between theory and practice. Much of the argument about management theory relevance is based in an assumption that theory is a 'right' way to view the world that needs to be better distilled and disseminated in order to increase relevance. The argument is that we need better theories.

Business schools have, however, already produced a number of theories and, given the growth in management education over the past 20 years (AACSB 2002; Gerdes 2005), have inducted many of today's practitioners into those theories (Abrahamson 1996; Mazza and Alvarez 2000). Furthermore, organizations recruit business school graduates (Milton 2008) and sponsor employees to complete an MBA or other business qualification (Baxter 2008). Employees, in a bid to develop skills and further their careers, make time and pay fees to gain management qualifications (Milton 2008). Should we assume that practitioners leave business school and promptly discard all theoretical traces, in order to get on with doing better practice? The idea that practitioners attend business school for the purposes of getting a value-adding qualification in the job market that they then abandon on the basis that it is too irrelevant to actually use in practice is surely ludicrous. Furthermore, it is not supported by the limited empirical research into uses of theory in practice, which indicates that practitioners do use our theories, albeit not necessarily in the way they were taught in business school (Baruch and Peiper, 2000; Cheng 2000; Hay and Hodgkinson 2008; Ishida 1997; Jarzabkowski et al. 2009; 2009; Kretovics 1999; Priem and Rosenstein 2000; Simpson *et al.* 2005; Sturges et al. 2003; Wren et al. 2007). Rather, it is likely that theories are used because they have technical, cultural and linguistic legitimacy that makes them easily appropriable (Campbell 1997). That is, technically, well known theories are familiar and considered to be robust, hence their technical legitimacy need not be questioned prior to use (Baldrige et al. 2004), even where the theoretical underpinnings may no longer apply to the use (Jarzabkowski and Wilson 2006; Zbaracki 1998). Culturally such theories are widely accepted, having been broadly disseminated in business schools, business texts and other media (Abrahamson 1996; Mazza and Alvarez 2004). Linguistically, they are recognizable, making them easy to use for purposes of mutual intelligibility (Barry and Elmes 1997). Indeed, these fea-

tures of theory taught in business schools make theory highly appropriable in practice (Jarzabkowski 2004).

Hence, we propose that we need first to rethink the fundamental questions of what constitutes relevant theory through a practice lens. That is, it is quite probable that the theory taught in business schools becomes part of the everyday practice of work, but not in the ways that we think they should be used. Building upon Weick's (1995) proposition that theory interacts better with its prescription by receiving feedback, we argue that the use of theories in practice is more complex than an examination of the extent of their direct application. Theories are no more than approximations that represent the interim struggles of social scientists as they strive for a bigger theory with a wider scope (Weick, 1995). Theories are not static concepts in a dichotomous relation with practice, but are living, breathing guesses, frameworks and general principles that are brought into being as practitioners use and adapt them in their everyday practice. However, current concerns about the actionable nature of business school theory are grounded in representationalist, rational choice perspectives (Rorty 1991; Tsoukas 1998; Tsoukas and Knudsen 2002) that marginalize the uses of theory in practice. A practice perspective moves us beyond linear, representationalist concepts of actionable knowledge to considering both the practical uses of knowledge and how these uses might inform our design of theory. Tsoukas and Knudsen (2002) problematize perspectives on the use of strategy knowledge as one of the epistemological relationship between strategic thinking and acting. From a representational epistemology, there is a Cartesian relationship between thought and action, in which thought precedes action (Rorty 1991; Tsoukas 1998; Tsoukas and Knudsen 2002; Varela et al. 1991). A representational epistemology sums up the proposed relationship between knowledge and action as; "*Action is driven by reliable prior knowledge*" (Tsoukas and Knudsen 2002: 425).

From a representational perspective, the business environment contains a set of given principles that are rendered obvious through 'relevant' theory, enabling practitioners to draw upon these principles in order to guide well-informed action. Therefore, a purpose of theoretical knowledge is to provide knowledge that informs managerial thinking in an accurate way that will assist rational, instrumental action (Jarzabkowski and Wilson, 2006). This perspective implicitly assumes that the more theoretically robust knowledge is, the more that it will have specific application to particular conditions (see Baldrige et al. 2004). Actionable knowledge thus describes contextual conditions as an objective reality and provides a prescription for acting within that reality. Should the knowledge cease to have application to a particular context, the rational practitioner will discard it. From this perspective, knowledge that fails to deliver on its prescriptions is a consequence of either the failure of practitioners, who are unable or unwilling to use the knowledge adequately (Beyer and Trice 1978), or a failure of the knowledge since it is not able to have the desired effect on practice (Lozeau et al. 2002).

A practice epistemology focuses squarely on the use of knowledge. While the assumptions underpinning representational uses of knowledge are based on rational choice, a practice perspective has an assumption of knowledge use as practical-evaluative wisdom (Chia 2004; Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Jarzabkowski 2005; Tsoukas 1998; Wilson and Jarzabkowski 2004). Practical evaluative use of knowledge deals with the ability to 'get things done' within the particular contingencies and demands of the here and now (Jarzabkowski, 2005). Practitioners exercise real-time judgments "in the face of considerable ambiguity, uncertainty, and conflict [where] means and ends sometimes contradict each other, and unintended consequences require changes in strategy and direction" (Emirbayer and Mische 1998: 994). In such judgments, they draw upon existing theoretical knowledge, adapting it

according to the demands of their specific contexts. That is, practitioners draw upon knowledge in order to think as they act, constructing and modifying both their everyday work and the theories that inform it in the process. In practical-evaluative agency practitioners reconcile theoretical knowledge and practical application, through the performance of activity that involves multiple analyses, negotiations, truces, agreements, investments, and commitments (Hendry, 2000). In doing so, they adapt, use, and manipulate those theoretical resources that are to hand with less concern for their theoretical principles than for their ability to 'get the job done'. A practice perspective thus involves the use of knowledge as it is adapted to the needs of any given situation (Jarzabkowski 2004; Seidl 2007).

A practice perspective moves away from the linear and uni-directional concept of academic knowledge inherent in the representational argument. Knowledge is not a reified construct that may be possessed but part of the social practices in which actors participate in order to communicate and construct meanings about their everyday work lives in ways that are intelligible to others (Astley and Zammuto 1992; Chia 2004; Cook and Brown, 1999; Jarzabkowski and Spee 2009; Tsoukas and Knudsen 2002; Wenger 1998). Hence, bridging academic theory and practice may not depend upon the development of better theories, meaning ones that are more relevant, but on better understanding of how theory is used in practice (Cook and Brown 1999; Jarzabkowski and Kaplan 2008).

Theories become embedded in both the languages of theory and practice (Barry and Elmes 1997). As practitioners draw upon theoretical knowledge in their everyday practice, often with little concern for its theoretical origins, they adapt, modify and alter theory to the contextual setting in which application takes place. Better understanding of these practical uses will be helpful to organization theorists as they seek to increase the relevance of their theorizing (Weick 1995). If theories of organization really are approximations and temporary

constructs, then their practical application should serve to re-inform and to modify the theories which underpin the various frameworks they produce. Indeed, understanding practice may lead to greater sophistication as well as greater applicability of theory. However, the key to this lies in theorists understanding the world of the practitioner and how practitioners combine and re-use theory in ways which do not always match the intentions of the theorists. The practice of using theory in everyday life needs to be understood by organization theorists before they can claim to be making theories that are more relevant.

### ***Empirical Challenges***

Empirical analysis of the generation and use of academic knowledge in organizational practice is complicated by the fact that it is a reflexive as well as a scientific process. It entails examination of the intersection of two practices: academic examination of organizations and organizational practice. Whether taking a representationalist view or a constructivist view, and whether intended to influence organizational practice or not, organizational studies are deeply intertwined with organizational practice. The targets for theoretical understanding are phenomena that arise as organizational practitioners create and derive meaning from the organizations in which they live. Organizations are artifacts (Simon 1969) that reflect the purposes and the meaning attached by those who shape them and operate within them. Academics are also practitioners—of scholarly pursuit. Their activities to generate and empirically test theory about organizations reflect their purposes and occur within institutional settings that they shape and from which they derive meaning. Knowledge is generated and consumed by both practices as they pursue their separate purposes.

Analysis of the generation and use of academic knowledge about organizations thus requires conceptualization of the relationship between the knowledge that is generated

within two different practices. Relevance of theory to organizational practice depends on its capacity to inform action taken to address practical issues and challenges. This is necessarily through a process by which theoretical knowledge is combined with the knowledge of practice and in this process is adapted and manipulated to fit the purposes of the actors. Relevance is not a unidirectional construct. As argued above based on Weick (1995), the practical outcomes of applying theory-based knowledge are relevant to enhanced theoretical understanding.

What does this imply for our understanding of the possibilities to bridge the gap between theory and practice and to carry out academic work in a manner that is relevant to organizational practice? A major implication is that advancing academic knowledge and applying it to advance practical knowledge are both inherently combinatorial processes. The advance of scholarly knowledge of organizations is characterized by iterative cycles that include the generation and elaboration of theory and its empirical testing in organizations. Although it may be possible to theorize about organizations without connecting to practice, empirically testing those theories inevitably brings the knowledge of practice into the process. No matter how pristine the concepts being tested or how well “controlled” the experiment, the processes to explain, understand, or predict organizational phenomena inevitably encounter and are impacted by the practical knowledge underpinning them.

When academics apply a practice-based perspective to consider how academic knowledge gets used, we may find it easy to accept that use entails incorporation into the knowledge-at-hand of organizational practitioners—and that theoretical knowledge can only be assimilated if it is technically, culturally and linguistically legitimate and appropriable (Campbell 1997). Academics may find it more difficult to accept the converse argument that enhancing our theoretical understanding of organizations requires combining our theoretical



knowledge with knowledge from other practices. For organizational researchers this means getting beyond distant and narrow discipline based perspectives on organizational phenomena and becoming close enough to organizational phenomena to be able to evaluate theory in the context of practice and of practical application. A full conceptualization of relevance that can form the basis for its empirical investigation must be based on this more systemic perspective.

The debate about relevance is characterized by many diverse perspectives. Some voices in the debate argue that academic and practical communities have incommensurable knowledge and knowledge conventions, and that relevance should not be a goal of academics as this means they cannot learn from one another (e.g., Keiser & Leiner, 2009). Acknowledging the difference of knowledge conventions and the profound separation, but perhaps not the incommensurability, the voices advocating greater relevance of organizational studies to practice almost without exception argue that this requires greater connections and familiarity between academic researchers and organizational practitioners (e.g., Bartunek 2007; Rynes in press). Many see classroom training through MBA and other business programs as an insufficient conduit that reaches only a portion of organizational practitioners and is often not centered on academic knowledge. They point out that there is little evidence that, once out of school, practitioners are consumers of the ongoing knowledge that is created in universities (Locke 2007; Rousseau 2007; Rynes in press). To address this challenge, some focus on better translation, advocating the creation of evidence bases to make academic “facts” (Rousseau et al. 2008) and “principles” (Locke 2007) easily accessible to practitioners, or the crafting of academic knowledge in language and formats that are more easily consumed by practitioners who are not familiar with research methodology and

terminology. An extreme version of this perspective is that academics should focus on the crafting of “sticky” concepts that embody academic knowledge (Rousseau 2007).

A different argument is that relevance is “lost before translation” (Shapiro, Kirkman and Courtney 2007: 249)— that a major impediment to relevance is the lack of overlap between the questions that academics ask and the problems and questions that practitioners face (e.g., Casio and Aguinas 2008). Problem-focused research has theoretical appeal as an approach to bridge the gap between theory and practice given the argument that it is in times when the ready at hand solutions of practitioners are not adequate to address the problems they face that they are most likely to be open to new ways of thinking that challenge traditional practice (Weick 2003). Van de Ven (2006), in his methodological treatise on “engaged scholarship”, has advocated bringing together multiple perspectives, knowledge bases, and methodologies to address complex problems.

Rather than viewing the challenge as one of translation and dissemination, there are many voices that argue that research with a dual focus on theory and practice requires academics to examine the fit between the way they carry out research and the nature of organizational phenomena and change. Harkening back to Lewin’s (1948) tenet that one can learn most about organizations by trying to change them, many advocate more multi-dimensional approaches that include multi-disciplinary perspectives, examining phenomena at multiple levels of analysis, through time, and in situ, including testing theory through the intentional introduction of change into organizations (Lawler et al. 1985, 1999). “Full-cycle” research programs and careers (Chatman, 2005) that alternate between observation based and manipulation based research methodologies are advocated to bridge the divide between theory and practice by having academics go back and forth across it (Tranfield and Starkey 1998).

The most direct embodiment of combining the knowledge of academic and organizational practices to explicitly focus on the generation of knowledge that addresses practical issues is in the concepts of collaborative research and co-creation processes (Denis and Lomas 2003; Shani et al. 2008). These approaches do not presuppose the methodologies that should be employed to generate knowledge, but they advocate for a collaborative relationship between academics and organizational practitioners in investigations that can yield knowledge for both communities. Action research goes a step further away from academic-centric research, centering the research around the solving of problems of concern to the practitioner participants (Reason and Bradbury 2001), rather than around the theoretical concerns of academics. Design research (Van Aken 2005; Romme 2003), does not explicitly take a collaborative or co-creation perspective, but explicitly frames the purpose of the research challenge as yielding knowledge that enables organizational practitioners to design organizations that accomplish their purposes.

We expect that relevance and application is not a unitary concept or single methodology but is achieved through a mixture of the approaches described above. The relationships between academic research and organizational practice may be best understood in the context of networks of relationships between the institutions, practitioners, and practices of scholars of organizations and those of organizational practitioners. These networks are shaped by purposes. In some cases the purposes of various stakeholders may overlap and be best achieved through tight connection. In other cases, diverse purposes may not be tightly connected, despite the ontological and epistemological connectedness because academic practice focuses on organizations that are the product of the organizational practices that create and shape them to pursue purpose.

As in all areas of theoretical investigation, progress depends on both the generation and the empirical testing of theory. We are inherently embroiled in a domain of investigation that focuses on behavior in and of settings built to accomplish human purposes and with enormous impact on human well-being. We are therefore challenged to understand how our own purposes and behaviors impact our episteme as well as the domain we are studying. In our quest to better understand the relationship between our academic practices and the organizational practices we study and try to understand, we must get beyond arguments based solely on theory and preferences, and empirically examine the fundamental dynamics of the relationships. Put simply, we believe that much more empirical work is required based on theoretical frameworks that place academic work in the broader context of society. This is required not only to understand whether and how theory based research can impact society. It is also required to understand the various models of academic research, the contributions they make, and how they combine (or don't) to further both our theoretical understandings and our capacity for ethical impact.

We believe that the seven articles in this special issue represent steps in this direction. These papers are briefly described below.

### **The Contributions to the Special Issue**

(1) In their paper "Theorizing as Engaged Practice" *Mike Zundel* and *Panagiotis Kokkalis* (2010) reject the conventional view that theory and practice are completely separated realms and that theory is an abstract and generalized concept. Instead they hold that 'theorizing' is also a human activity and that this activity is not different in being from engaged organizational practice. Zundel and Kokkalis develop an alternative view and build on the

philosophy of Martin Heidegger and Practice-theory approaches that are increasingly discussed in organization studies. They suggest that there are a myriad of 'overlaps' between theory and practice and that both academics and organizational practitioners engage with their environment in a practical and manipulative way rather than looking at things from a distant perspective. The task of academics is not so much the immediate solutions of practical problems, but instead to show possible ways of acting and seeing and to light up situations and problems.

(2) In "Construction and Use of Generic Knowledge in Organization Science Viewed as a Science of the Artificial" *Marie-José Avenier* (2010) has addressed foundational ontological, epistemological and methodological questions that are often overlooked in the debates about bridging the rigor/relevance gap. Arguing that the constructivists who have decried the lack of suitability of positivistic science for studying organizations have not offered a coherent alternative, she proposes an alternative, rigorous, science paradigm based on a constructivist epistemology. She finds in Simon's sciences of the artificial (1969) the basis for an alternative science paradigm: one based on the modelling and understanding of artifacts, contributing knowledge that incorporates both natural law and human intent, and relevant for understanding existing artifacts and/or for designing and implementing new artifacts having intended properties. She offers design sciences as an exemplar of this paradigm, and develops a framework for constructivist organization design sciences. Her discussion of the issues of the generation and use of knowledge within this framework is particularly notable for the rigor of her analysis of the epistemic work that she considers to be inherent in this approach. She deals with critical issues of general knowledge and how it is created, the legitimization of the knowledge that is generated; and the notions of use and activation, and in so doing provides a sound basis for scholarly debate.

(3) In “That’s Relevant! Towards a Taxonomy of Practical Relevance” *Alexander Nicolai and David Seidl* (2010) analyze the concept of “relevance” with the help of distinct approaches from the sociology of science and an empirical study of the meaning of the term in the management and organization literature. Although this concept is widely used in scholarly debate it is seldom defined precisely. Instead, the concept of “relevance” is used in very different ways with conflicting implications for the relationship between science and practice. Nicolai and Seidl develop a taxonomy of different forms of relevance that is based on an analysis of 450 articles from three academic journals and over 100 articles, chapters and books from the fast growing literature on the practical relevance of management studies. The authors discuss the role of various forms of relevance and maintain that there is an overemphasis on instrumental relevance in comparison with conceptual and legitimacy relevancy. Nicolai and Seidl argue for a reorientation of the relevancy debate and to focus more on conceptual relevance which they suggest would be more fruitful to enhance the transfer of knowledge between different subsystems of society.

(4) ‘In Search of Relevance: Perspectives on the Contribution of Academic-Practitioner Networks’ *David Knights and Harry Scarbrough* (2010) apply two different theoretical frameworks to examine the dynamics of co-production of knowledge in the context of two academic-practitioner networks set up for collaborative knowledge generation in the domains of knowledge management and financial services. These were settings that fit Gibbons’ and Nowotny’s notion of Mode 2 knowledge generation (Gibbons et al. 1994; Nowotny et al. 2001). They were set up outside of traditional discipline based university settings and assembled multi-disciplinary academics and relevant and knowledgeable practitioners for the knowledge co-production process. The authors found the perspective of Actor Network Theory (ANT) (Latour 1993) particularly insightful in understanding the micro-

dynamics of these networks, which were fluid and dynamic sets of actors, activities, and focuses involving both human and non-human actants. Relevance, it seems, is not easily attained through better communication of academic knowledge, but rather was achieved in particular contexts through “emergent, idiosyncratic and unruly” (p. XXX) processes punctuated by instances of translation between practitioners and academic groups.

(5) ‘When Policy Meets Practice - Colliding Logics and the Challenges of ‘Mode 2’ Initiatives in the Translation of Academic Knowledge’ is the title of the paper by *Jacky Swan, Maxine Robertson, Sue Newell, Sue Dopson, and Mike Bresnen* (2010). Drawing upon theories of colliding institutional logics, the authors conceptualise Mode 1 and Mode 2 forms of knowledge production as grounded in different logics. They present an empirical paper that explains the dialectical tensions that occur when policies aimed at Mode 2 knowledge production are implemented by communities of scientists that have been trained within Mode 1 forms of knowledge production, even where the participants have the best of intentions to work within a Mode 2 logic. While not offering any resolution of the problem of the Mode 1 and Mode 2 knowledge divide, the authors do illustrate the fundamental problems that may explain why this special issue attracted so few empirical papers addressing co-production of knowledge between academics and practitioners. Given that these tensions will persist in any attempts at Mode 2 knowledge production, the authors discuss the implications of their study for managing projects where these two logics are co-present.

(6) In ‘Dialogues between Academics and Practitioners: The Role of Generative Dialogic Episodes’ *Robert MacIntosh, Nic Beech and Donald MacLean* (2010) argue that the association between academia and practice is a dialogic, that is in continuous conversation and adaptation, rather than resolution or synthesis. Presenting illustrations from an extended action research project, in which academics were working with practitioners specifically to do

research that would inform and improve practice, they suggest that aspects of the thinking underpinning the relevance debate can be self-defeating. They perform a textual analysis of how academics refer to relevant research in their articles on the topic and then examine how practitioners view academic practice, even where they have invited those academics in to help them improve their own practice. Their paper highlights the potential for mismatched expectations between academics and practitioners, before proposing a modified view of dialogic relationships as a possible basis for enabling co-production of knowledge and understanding.

(7) In his paper 'Knowledge and Practice: Organization Studies Within a Historical and Figurational Context' *Tim Newton* (2010) critically analysis the role of theory pluralism, paradigms incommensurability, and the prevalent fads and fashions for the organization studies field's impact on management practice and public policy. Unlike conventional wisdom, Newton suggests that more coherence and control of the field will not enhance scholarship's influence on practice. He argues for more historical analysis of the field's development and for considering the broader social and political context of organizational scholarship and practice. In particular the complex configurations of social and political interdependencies between individuals and social groups are important in as much as they reflect the changing power networks over time. These (con-)figurations are central for understanding the OS field's impact on practice. His analysis reflects historical sociology and social theories from Norbert Elias, Andrew Abbott, and Richard Whitley. Newton discusses a number of meta-studies of OS. Newton also argues to more deeply reflect the ethical and political challenges of raising the impact of academic work on organizational practice.

## **Challenges for Future Research**



Given its topic, we were struck by how few of the submissions for this special issue were based on empirical examinations of the phenomenon in question: “The generation and use of academic knowledge about organizations’. This topic is one of episteme, connection, and use, yet the prevalent way in which academics seem to be thinking about it is through the lenses of theory. We fear that academia will put theory and the tenets of normal science between itself and the empirical phenomenon in question. There were very few rigorous empirical treatments of this topic. There was much “arm-chair” philosophizing. On the other hand, there were a number of “stories” or “process descriptions” of doing work with organizations that were not framed with a clear definition of what knowledge is being sought, how it is generated, and used. We feel there is an urgent need to bring together theories of knowledge and knowledge creation with rigorous empirical investigation taking a practice-based perspective. Until this happens, the investigation of the topic of this special issue is largely an academic exercise plagued by the very gap between theory and practice that it purports to understand.

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<sup>i</sup> E.g. EU 6<sup>th</sup> Framework, Advanced Institute of Management, ESRC; recent calls from the U.S. National Science Foundation to fund research jointly proposed and implemented by academics and corporations