To Know and to Do: Academics' and Practitioners' Approaches to Management Research

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ABSTRACT

In the context of the ongoing debate between academic research and practitioner action, this article, from a supply side perspective, explores the different expressions of these debates – the relevance debate and the epistemological debate. It points to several ways forward – collaboration between academics and practitioners and forms of research which integrate action and knowledge creation. Both these ways are supported by an integrated form of research and action built around three audiences: first, second and third person.

INTRODUCTION

In the context of business school rankings, the *Financial Times* provide a ranking which is based on publications in journals that, by and large, are not only not read by managers but also limit academics to particular forms of research. That publication in these journals contributes to a ranking of MBA programmes, which are aimed at educating managers, poses questions in both academic and practitioner circles. These questions are part of the long-standing debate as to what constitutes 'real' research and worthwhile knowledge,

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and why information generated by consultants and academics tend to be underutilised in organisations (Brannick, 2000). There are two extensive bodies of knowledge dealing with this broad topic: one focusing on the 'doing' or the user perspective, the other on the nature of 'knowing' or the supply side (Menon and Varadarajan, 1992). The doing or user perspective focuses on organisational factors that either inhibit or facilitate knowledge utilisation. The supply side which is the focus of this paper looks at the characteristics of the study or the research process itself. There is limited overlap between the two strands of literature. Pfeffer and Sutton (2004), reflecting on the knowing/doing gap from a user perspective, outline eight factors, two of which (1 – knowing comes from doing and teaching others how and 2 – actions count more than elegant plans and concepts) acknowledge the importance of not separating research from action.

Underpinning the supply side debates is a perceived relevance gap between academics and practitioners, which appears to be growing larger (Starkey and Madan, 2001), and in our view this debate is becoming more confused. Sometimes the focus is epistemological and ontological (MacLean et al., 2002). At other times, it is the nature of worthwhile knowledge, tacit or formal (Weick, 2003), and on other occasions again, the debate focuses on two distinct but linked professional communities: managers and academics. But the precise nature of the gap or the relevance question is unclear. In order to clarify and specify our contribution, we rely on Reason and Marshall's (1987: 112-3) conclusion that all good research communicates with three audiences:

> All good research is *for me, for us,* and *for them*: it speaks to three audiences.... It is *for them* to the extent that it produces some kind of generalizable ideas and outcomes...It is *for us* to the extent that it responds to concerns *for our* praxis, is relevant and timely...[for] those who are struggling with problems in their field of action. It is *for me* to the extent that the process and outcomes respond directly to the individual researcher's being-in-the-world.

The construct of the three audiences has been developed to express three persons of inquiry and practice – first, second and third person (Torbert, 1998; Reason and Torbert, 2001; Reason and Bradbury, 2001). Taking this three audience approach our focus is mainly on the 'for them' component. In reality the 'for them' component will be of less interest to practitioners and be of direct relevance to the academic community. Hence, this article explores 1) the differences or different emphases, if any, between academic- and practitioner-generated formal knowledge or theory and 2) its consequence for action. It will also pose the question as to whether the criteria used to evaluate articles for *Financial Times*-listed journals need to be revised in light of a three audience approach. The *Financial Times*-listed journal, *Administrative Science Quarterly,* is concerned solely with theory, with no reference to action. 'The authors, reviewers, readers and editors who shape what is published in *Administrative Science Quarterly* insist, perhaps above all else, that articles contain strong organisational theory' (Sutton and Staw, 1995: 371). Interestingly Sutton and Staw's article devotes less than a half a page to detailing what is 'strong theory' and their answer is the standard simple response that it should answer the 'why' question. They go on to argue that the only criterion necessary is that the theory be 'particularly interesting', whatever that means! (Sutton and Staw, 1995: 379).

THE BASIS FOR THE PERENNIAL GAP BETWEEN ACADEMICS AND PRACTITIONERS

For many years now, there has been a question of relevance regarding standard research into the organisational sciences (e.g. Susman and Evered, 1978; Thomas and Tymon, 1982; Bettis, 1991; Schein, 1993; Lowendahl and Revang, 1998; Anderson and Herr, 1999; Rynes et al., 1999; Hatchuel, 2001; Ford et al. 2003). The observed gap and lack of harmony between theory and practice has also been a recurring theme in such business disciplines as marketing and the marketing literature suggests that there is a need to bridge that gap (American Marketing Association, 1988; O'Driscoll and Murray, 1998). According to Hunt (1994: 17) 'if we wish even to keep up with marketing practice – let alone lead it – we need to rethink our theories and empirical studies of marketing practice'. The practical relevance of much IT-based research has been seriously challenged also. Senn (1998: 23–4) argued that 'a great deal of the academic research conducted in information systems is not valued by IT practitioners' and that such research 'is not relevant, readable, or reachable'. There is a perception that researchers and educators are increasingly distancing themselves from managerial practice and, not unlike other social science fields, are becoming a closed, self-contained system (Razzaque, 1998).

It appears that the business world is generally ignoring the research and consequent knowledge produced by business schools or academia, since it feels it is irrelevant to its purposes (Huff, 2000; Beer, 2001; Lundberg, 2001; Pfeffer and Sutton, 2004). There is a contrary position which contends that the relevance argument is misguided. It is a failure to understand the complexities of knowledge production, its relationship to practice and the importance of 'independence', which is the unique contribution that universities make to society, that underpins this relevance gap (Grey, 2001). Grey argues that when we talk about relevance we ask the further question of relevance to whom and of what. By applying the three audience framework we can simplify the relevance argument, as the 'to whom and of what' is distinctly different for the different audiences. What is worthwhile for one audience is of less interest to the other audiences.

From this literature we identify three reasons for this de-coupling. The first is that there is an inherent incommensurability between science and practice, in other words the academia and management practices differ, since they represent two different, specialised and self-referential forms of discourse with divergent foci and interest. In common with most of the human sciences, the study of management has not succeeded in developing a common observational language (Whitley, 1984). Intellectual judgements remain tacit and highly dependant on everyday language and cultural conventions. In addition, the characteristics of managerial tasks and skills render a general management science improbable. Detailed knowledge of how individual organisations work is of less interest to the theorist than general conclusions about managerial practices which have implications for theoretical considerations (Whitley, 1984). This is the dominant academic language which differs from that used by practitioners. Christensen and Raynor (2003: 72) argue that if academic theory is going to be useful to hard-nosed executives, it must be researched and 'written in ways that make it possible for readers to diagnose their situation themselves'. Lundberg (2001) concludes that it is not surprising that managers who apply scientific knowledge or theory seldom get what they desire and turn less and less to academic scholars for assistance. Likewise academics who work on organisation- or manager-specific problems find their work devalued by their academic colleagues. Lundberg's concluding argument is that the nature of theorising itself is part responsible for the relevance gap.

Weick (2003) advances the debate by introducing two concepts, drawn from Kierkegaard: 'life understood backwards' (theory) vs 'life lived forwards' (practice). This conceptual duality reinforces the difference in perspective and focus between the theorist and practitioner. As Weick says (2003: 454):

> Life is understood backward when detached theorists deploy analysis, abstraction, and simplification after the fact in order to impose order and patterns on previous activities that were lived forward by involved practitioners. The living forward itself, however, is an altogether different form of activity. When practitioners live forward they tend to mix together false starts, routines, automatic thinking, unanticipated consequences, recoveries, trade-offs, improvisation, and trial and error. Their living is both less orderly and of a different order than it appears in hindsight.

Weick argues that theory and practice can be partly reconciled if living forward is differentiated according to Heidegger's distinction of ready-to-hand living from unready-to-hand living. His central point is that better theorising occurs by closely examining those moments where backward and forward meet, namely unready-to-hand moments. These are moments when practitioners are interrupted, often in the form of failures, and theorists have an opportunity to get a richer glimpse of what is going on in the practitioner's project. Theories are built around what people notice when they are interrupted and how they cope with interruptions are not just commentaries on how people react to irritants and hassles. Rather, those theories point to fundamental properties of ongoing, involved, practical activity. When everyday projects suffer a breakdown of action, theorists and practitioners alike share a common vantage point from which they can glimpse thwarted potentialities embedded in networks of projects.

The second reason is epistemological, where there are those who attribute a sense of misplaced faith in the canons of modernist traditional research, where it has been assumed that if a research project is methodologically sound it will contribute to scientific knowledge and ultimately to practice (Brown, 1995). In the context of research in the field of organisation science, Susman and Evered (1978: 582) noted that 'the findings in our scholarly management journals are only remotely related to the real world of practicing managers'. In their view, it appears that this dilemma is rooted in positivist research approaches that dominate the field. Such approaches 'are deficient in their capacity to generate knowledge for use by members of organisations' (Susman and Evered, 1978: 585). Supporting this contention, Schein (1993: 703) reflected that 'we have largely adopted a traditional research paradigm that has not worked very well, a paradigm that has produced very reliable results about very unimportant things'. In a similar vein, it has been argued that most research in the strategy domain is 'irrelevant' since it is 'increasingly and prematurely stuck in a normal science straightjacket' (Bettis, 1991: 315).

The third reason is that the research focus or content is the problem (Menon and Varadarajan, 1992). Researchers should ensure that knowledge produced is relevant and transferred to practitioners in ways that enhance their capacity to use it. Thomas and Tymon (1982) put the responsibility for the lack of practitioner relevance firmly on the shoulders of the academic community and they identified five key needs of practitioners with respect to organisational science knowledge. The five are: descriptive relevance, goal relevance, operational validity, non-obviousness and timeliness.

THE NATURE OF MANAGEMENT RESEARCH AND THEORY

All business, marketing and management research is intrinsically linked to the whole process of knowing. The positivist tradition incorporating quantitative techniques rather than the hermeneutic or action research approaches is the dominant methodology used for knowledge generation for both communities of researchers. A basic argument underlying this article is that both communities of knowledge producers, academics and practitioners, employ the different research traditions with equal skill, rigor and appropriateness. This basic premise is in disagreement with the Carson et al. (2001) position. They identified three groups of marketing researchers, academic, business/consultants and practitioners, which are distinguishable along two methodological criteria a) rigor and validity and b) qualitative or quantitative methods. The academic and consultant researchers are very similar and tend to rely on rigor and validity and use quantitative techniques. For Carson et al., practitioner research is very different and relies on intuition and qualitative techniques.

An argument about good versus poor research is a very different matter and not the focus of this article. In this article, formal management knowledge is confined to research-based knowledge carried out to the highest standards by either academics or practitioners. Generally speaking, good research is purposeful, its goals are clearly defined and significant, the methodological procedures defensible, evidence is systematically analysed, statistical techniques are correctly followed and the 'objectivity' of the researcher clearly evident. The focus of this article is properly conducted research, which gives rise to worthwhile, credible knowledge, and its relationship to action.

According to James March (Huff, 2000) there are reasons why researchers should focus on basic research and foundational knowledge. The comparative advantage of fundamental knowledge over experiential knowledge decreases as one comes to concrete, specific situations. In a situation in which a manager has experience, an academic will not be very helpful and the managers are likely to know best. However, the comparative advantage shifts as one moves to more novel situations. It shifts to academic knowledge, to general knowledge, to fundamental knowledge. Fundamental knowledge becomes more useful to managers (in combination with context-specific, experimental knowledge) in changing worlds, in new ventures and when faced with the unexpected. Researchers who pursue immediate relevance are likely to produce knowledge that is both redundant with what managers already know and useful only over a limited time and under limited conditions. In addition it makes little or no contribution to the development of ideas about business management and organisations. These short-run research questions of minuscule importance contribute little to intellectual life and therefore, in the long run, little to business life. Even if this were not true, our more important obligation as scholars is to the pursuit of knowledge.

Most empirical research is in the domain of propositional knowledge. The outcome of research is stated as a set of propositions which claim to be statements of facts or truths about the world. These theoretical constructs and empirical statements provide a framing of the world, a context of meaning. Framing propositions empirically and theoretically makes an important contribution to human understanding. However they are not synonymous with the experiential knowledge of the world. Experiential knowledge involves knowing the world through sustained contact of a direct face-to-face nature. Each of the two windows on reality offers a limited perspective. This article focuses solely on formal or prepositional knowledge. However tacit or experiential knowledge is a key element in specific methodology such as action research.

In Whitley's (1984) view, the type of management knowledge produced by different constituents vary according to five criteria, which in our view consolidate around the criterion purpose or the action dimension. He identifies theory and theoretical related issues, such as specificity to individual organisations or the logic of general inference, as the key issue where academics differ from practitioners.

Table 1.1: Types of Management Knowledge

	Practitioners	**Consultants**	**Popular Writings**	**Academics**
Audience	Colleagues	Clients	Managerial Public	Researchers
Purpose	Corporate Success	Best Practice	Best Practice	Theoretical
Specificity to Individual Orgs	High	Medium	Low	Low
Reliance on Current Practices	High	High	High	Low
Public Availability	Low	Low	High	High

Source: Whitley (1984)

According to Bacharach (1989), there are two primary criteria upon which any theory may be evaluated: a) falsification and b) utility. The use of criteria to evaluate theory may also help to demystify some false dichotomies. The first false dichotomy is between qualitative and quantitative data collection modes. No matter how data are generated or collected, researchers are obliged to present them in a way that allows other scholars to use or disprove the data. The second is between theory construction and theory testing. If theory is not testable, no matter how profound or aesthetically pleasing it may be, it is not theory. The third false dichotomy is between theoreticians, consultants and practitioners. The role of consultant and practitioner researchers is to diminish the complexity of their or their client's empirical world, and explain and predict events. The goal of theory is to diminish the complexity of the empirical world on the basis of understandings, explanations and predictions. Thus in Bacharach's view, practitioners and theoreticians need a clear understanding of the rules of theory construction. This is the view also advocated by Christensen and Raynor (2003). Gummesson (2000) builds bridges between the two by seeing both groups as 'knowledge workers', whereby each has a different emphasis in relation to theory and practice; one pecks at theory and contributes to practice and the other pecks at practice and contributes to theory.

APPROACHES TO THEORY DEVELOPMENT

Academics engage in a dialogue of ideas (theory) and evidence (data) when they construct representations or theories of organisational and management activities. Organisation and management theory is a contestable and contested network of concepts and theories which are engaged in a struggle to impose certain meanings rather than others on shared understanding of organisational life in late modernity (Reed, 1996). Organisational researchers differ in their responses to the following three theory/data-related questions:

- What is the nature and role of theory in research?
- What is the ultimate goal or aim of organisational studies?
- What is the nature of representation in observational field studies?

(Putnam et al., 1993)

These differing responses constitute different epistemologies and the resultant debate relates to the representational assumptions upon which the knowledge claims made by different scholars/theorists can be evaluated and legitimated. Researchers' epistemological perspective ultimately determines what they consider as a valid, legitimate contribution to theory development or generation. Theory is implicitly embedded in all research approaches. Pure description is laden with implicit power relationships and all research operates from a theoretical slant.

Researchers' epistemological perspective determines what they consider as a valid, legitimate contribution to theory irrespective of whether we call it development, confirmation, validation, creation, building or generation (Peter and Olsen, 1993). The dominant approach or paradigm in management and organisational studies has been positivism and its successor realism (explanation, hypothetico-deductive, multi-method eclecticism). These approaches are defined primarily by their view that an external reality exists and that an independent value free researcher can examine this reality. The hermeneutic tradition, the other main approach (sometimes referred to as phenomenology, constructivism, interpretivism or the postmodern interpretivism relativist approach) argues that there is no objective or single knowable external reality and that the researcher is an integral part of the research process, not separate from it. This distinction is based on the subject-object dichotomy. This ontological 'subjective vs. objective' dimension concerns the assumptions social theories make about the nature of the social world. Positivism and its successors are concerned with generalisation and universal knowledge while the hermeneutic is more interested in particular knowledge sometimes referred to as inductive theory. In both traditions, action is separate from research or knowing.

PRACTITIONERS' VERSUS ACADEMICS' APPROACH TO THEORY DEVELOPMENT

While the academic research orientation may be characterised as concept-driven design, the practitioner research orientation, on the other hand, may be viewed as system-driven observation. In the former approach, researchers first select elements and relations from a conceptual domain, determine the methodology(ies) to construct a design and finally implement that design on some system of their choice. In the latter method, practitioners select the elements and relations to be studied from some existing system, choose the methodology(ies) to develop observations; and finally move to the conceptual domain to interpret that set of observations. In both approaches knowledge is pursued using similar steps in a different sequence – what the academic researchers do first, practitioners prefer to do last (Brinberg and Hirschman, 1986).

More often than not, practitioners end up conducting relationship studies which attempt to determine the relationship between dependant and independent variables, rather than linking the results to an established research programme or a body of theory. However, their conceptual domain may be influenced by some preconceived notion or theory, or by some previous experiences which in turn influence their explanation. Thus, managers actually create a contextual reality, rather than discovering the true reality whatever that may be. Their view(s) of the system in question and selection of pertinent elements and relations depicting the system could significantly differ from those of another practitioner.

Practitioners are affected by a need to act while academics are not. This creates some motivational problems. In a given research orientation, practitioners spend resources in developing, articulating and finally solving a problem. The set of concepts selected to explain a phenomenon is often least attended to because the focus is basically on the problem and because no one set of concepts is likely to explain the problem in its true dimensions. But in an academic research orientation, generally the greatest amount of resources are spent in developing a detailed articulation of concepts and the phenomenon is least attended to because it is selected simply to illustrate relations among concepts (Brinberg and Hirschman, 1986).

WAYS FORWARD: FIRST, SECOND AND THIRD PERSON INQUIRY/PRACTICE: TOWARD INTEGRATION

Are there ways forward? In our view the way ahead is an integrated evaluation framework. An integrative approach to research incorporates three audiences, first, second and third person

(Torbert, 1998; Reason and Torbert, 2001; Reason and Bradbury, 2001). Traditionally, research has focused on third person – researchers doing research on third persons and writing a report for other third persons, typically other academic researchers. Practitioner research typically focuses on a second person audience, i.e. the members of the system who have experienced the action and who, hopefully, have seen its benefits. Gibbons et al. (1994: vii) outline a new form of knowledge production (Mode 2) which, although originally an outgrowth from its traditional counterpart (Mode 1), is becoming increasingly distinctive.

> Our view is that while Mode 2 may not be replacing Mode 1, Mode 2 is different from Mode 1 – in nearly every respect...it is not being institutionalised primarily within university structures...(it) involves the close interaction of many actors throughout the process of knowledge production...(it) makes use of a wider range of criteria in judging quality control. Overall, the process of knowledge production is becoming more reflexive and affects at the deepest levels what shall count as 'good science'.

In line with Gibbons et al., who identified a wider range of research evaluation criteria as a key element of Mode 2 type knowledge, we see the integration of the three audience framework as the key to understanding the relevance/gap debate. Integration will take place at the research process level and two ways are emerging, 1) academic and practitioner collaboration and 2) critical-realism and action research.

Academic and Practitioner Collaboration

As it is very difficult for academics to practice management and practitioners to conduct and publish research, the most common forum where academics' and practitioners' concerns are combined is when they work together (Rynes et al., 1999). Typically this is a forum where the academic acts as an external researcher working in collaboration with a manager who is an insider to the setting (Bartunek and Louis, 1996; Amabile et al., 2001). Many of the classical studies of organisations were the outcome of such collaboration between an external academic and an internal practitioner (e.g. Roethlisberger and Dickson, 1939; Coch and French, 1948).

Collaborative research, as the term suggests, is an emerging action research approach to conducting inquiry in organisations, with the aim of 'generating new insights that can simultaneously serve both action and the creation of new theoretical development' (Adler et al., 2004: 359). Collaborative research, at the most basic level, attempts to refine the relationship between academic researchers and organisational actors from research 'on' or 'for' to research 'with'. In doing so, it attempts to integrate knowledge creation with problem solving and 'inquiry from the inside' with 'inquiry from the outside'.

- A partnership among a variety of individuals forming a 'community of inquiry' within communities of practice.
- An emergent inquiry process that differs from the notion of scientific research as a closed linear and planned activity.

Adler et al. (2004) provide a theoretical basis for collaborative research and present nine case studies in which external individual researchers worked in partnership with insider managers on issues of joint concern and knowledge generation.

Rynes et al. (2001) argue that the extent to which an organisation's self-design activities, in other words the action-oriented (behavioural) and cognitive processes that members use to redesign and reorganise their organisations, are informed by the results of research will determine how useful an organisation's members will consider the research to be. The strong relationship between self-design activities informed by the research and perceived usefulness is striking, especially given the lack of support for any relationships between self-design informed by research and joint interpretive forums. Taken at face value, it would seem that researchers must do more than work collaboratively with organisation members to understand research findings. Perhaps they must become part of an organisation's self-design activities if they wish to promote usefulness. Such participation would constitute adoption of a more traditional action research model, in which researchers are also change consultants and are involved in internal organisational processes. Rynes et al. concluded that joint interpretive forums only related to self-design activities being informed by research when the forums resulted in perspective taking that took practitioners' views into account. Extrapolating from this, they conclude that research may be usefully incorporated into self-design activities without extensive involvement of the researcher as interventionist, if enough perspective-taking occurs in the joint interpretive forums that organisation members can introduce the knowledge generated in the study into their self-design activities.

Thomas and Tymon (1982) advocate a more hands-off approach, whereby practitioners would be involved in the feedback and review process within organisational science. A similar position is put forward by Razzaque (1998: 13) when he suggests that academics and practitioners should be involved in marketing seminars, forums and colloquiums. These avenues may serve as common grounds for the academics and practitioners to interact, exchange ideas and learn from each other by seeking clarification of issues, concepts and methodologies pertaining to the study and practice of marketing. Similarly academic supervisors of practitioner researchers also perform this role in reverse (Coghlan and Brannick, 2005). The growing development of practitioner-oriented doctoral programmes provides a setting in which academics and practitioners work together, each contributing a particular perspective to the research process.

Pragmatic-Critical Realism and Action Research

The second possible way forward to the academic-practitioner divide is the approach to research itself, particularly through a research process that has action built into it. According to Elias (1994), action research is a methodology that allows the flow and interplay of theory and action to take place. Reason and Torbert (2001: 6) argue that following the linguistic turn of postmodern interpretism of the past thirty years, which views reality as a human construction based on language, it is time for an 'action turn' which aims at 'timely, voluntary, mutual, validity-testing, transformative action in all moments of living'.

Pragmatic-critical realism differs from positivism and postmodernism in that it articulates a clear position on action. A premise underlying pragmatism is that all human behaviour and all human knowledge takes place within and simultaneously reconstructs culturally derived meanings. Pragmatic-critical realism demands a reflexive political praxis. In other words, knowledge claims do not relate to some quest for foundational knowledge, as is the case for positivists and postmodernists, but instead looks to practical and political consequences. Johnson and Duberley (2000) argue that a pragmatic-critical realist perspective raises many questions regarding management knowledge or theory:

- Who were or are the carrier groups of management knowledge?
- How did or do those carrier groups gain and maintain a position that enables them to authoritatively present to practitioner significant others their particular interpretation of, and solutions to, their problems?
- What were or are those problems and what were or are the motivations of those practitioner significant others?
- What were or are the outcomes of those social processes?
- How might (is) management knowledge develop(ing) as it both caters for and constructs the concerns of practitioner significant others?

Action research focuses on research *in* action rather than research *about* action. The term, action research, is a generic one and is used to refer to a broad range of activities and methods. At its core, action research is a research approach which focuses on simultaneous action and research in a participative manner. Within this approach are multiple paradigms or methodologies, each of which has its own distinctive emphasis (Greenwood and Levin, 1998). Some action research methodologies have developed from sociology and focus on how communities as socio-political systems enact change. These approaches tend to focus on structural emancipatory issues, relating to, for example, education, social exclusion and power and control (Whyte, 1991; Fals-Borda and Rahman 1991; Lynch, 1999). Other action research methodologies have their origins in applied behavioural science and have developed in the organisational context (Coch and French, 1948; Foster, 1972; Schein, 1987; French and Bell, 1999). McLean et al. (2002) argue that research approaches such as action research, clinical method, grounded theory and co-operative inquiry may make a legitimate claim to producing knowledge 'in Mode 2'.

A significant feature of all action research is that the purpose of research is not simply or even primarily to contribute to the fund of knowledge in a field, or even to develop emancipatory theory, but rather to forge a more direct link between intellectual knowledge/theory and action so that each inquiry contributes directly to the flourishing of human persons and their communities (Reason and Bradbury, 2001). It is participative, in that the members of the system which is being studied participate actively in the process. It aims at both taking action and creating knowledge or theory about that action (Greenwood and Levin, 1998; Coghlan and Brannick, 2005; Reason and Bradbury, 2001). It involves an extended epistemology, by integrating four forms of knowing: experiential, presentational, propositional and practical (Reason and Torbert, 2001). Since its intended outcomes are both action and theory, it does not recognise the distinction between academic and practitioner knowledge. According to principles of action research the traditional split between research and action is, in many respects, a false distinction and it is typically based on extreme views of what academic researchers are and what practitioners are.

In a more complete vision of research, as presented by action research and other transformational inquiry approaches, authentic third person research integrates first and second person voices. First person research is typically characterised as the forms of inquiry and practice that one does on one's own and so addresses the ability of the individual to foster an inquiring approach to his or her own life, to act out of awareness and purpose. First person research can take researchers 'upstream', where they inquire into their basic assumptions, desires, intentions and philosophy of life. It can also take them 'downstream' where they inquire into their behaviour, ways of relating and their action in the world. Second person inquiry/practice addresses their ability to inquire with others into issues of mutual concern, through face-to-face dialogue and conversation. Third person inquiry/practice aims at creating communities of inquiry and involving people beyond the direct second person action. Third person is impersonal and is actualised through dissemination by reporting, publishing and extrapolating from the concrete to the general. As Reason and Torbert (2001) point out there are plenty of implicit examples of first, second and third person inquiry, but what is required now is explicit integrating of all three persons of inquiry with action and inquiry. Jacobs (2003) conducted action research in an organisation where the second person outcomes were a renewal of communication structures, participation in strategy formation and a redefinition of some of the key results areas of the organisation. At the same time, in third person terms, he contributed a theory of responsiveness in organisations to the academic community. A case could be made that neither the practitioners in that organisation nor the academic community are particularly interested in the outcomes for the other.

CONCLUSIONS

Over thirty years ago this debate about relevance in the social sciences concluded that research can answer specific questions but it cannot tell practitioners or policy makers what to do, because that decision calls for consideration of a wide variety of ill-defined factors such as professional judgement and practice, the politics of the field in question and the broader societal concerns (Rand, 1971). This article adheres to this principle that managerial or practitioner tacit knowledge is distinct from the formal theory which is the focus of this paper. We look at the relevance debate from the standpoint of the construction of formal knowledge or theory.

We have explored the different expressions of these debates – the relevance debate and the epistemological debate. We have shown how academics' and practitioners' self-definitions contribute to their use of knowledge. We have pointed to several ways forward – collaboration between academics and practitioners and forms of research which integrate action and knowledge creation. In our view, both these ways are supported by an integrated form of research and action which highlights the importance of the three audiences. We also surmise that an all-encompassing view of research, which comprises individual inquiry and learning, collaborative inquiry and the generation of theory for a broader audience, is one which can underpin collaboration between academics and practitioners, as well as action research. Christensen and Raynor (2003: 74) also 'hope that a deeper understanding of what makes theory useful will enable editors to choose which pieces of research they will publish – and managers to choose which articles they will read and believe – on the basis of something other than authors' credentials or past successes'. The research process engaged in is key to the integration of the three audiences. As Lundberg (2001: 21–2) argues, a way forward should be based on two organisational science correctives or changes that need to be implemented:

- The phenomena of interest to both practitioner and academic are complex and continuously changing. The implication of this fact is to legitimate multiple explanation by multiple voices and by doing so encourage more variety in methods and perspectives.
- Theoreticians to drop their heavy tools and the debates they engender. 'Paradigm warriors, ontological debaters, methodological purists, school of thought defenders, and the like, all pretenders of the one and only best way, need to find dwindling audiences.'

Whatever ways forward are adopted in different settings, we think that the sorts of dogmatic positions, as engendered by the *Financial Times* lists, for example, need to be modified. The criteria used to evaluate articles for inclusion in *Financial Times* journals need to be revisited to take account of a three audience framework which accepts the rightful position of formal theory but not at the expense of the other two audiences.

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