

5-1-2008

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Recommended Citation

Bartunek, Jean M. (2008) "You're an organization development practitioner-scholar: Can you contribute to organizational theory?," *Organization Management Journal*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.
Available at: <https://scholarship.shu.edu/omj/vol5/iss1/3>



You're an organization development practitioner-scholar: Can you contribute to organizational theory?

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Abstract

Mainstream organizational theorizing and the work of organization development (OD) practitioner-scholars have followed somewhat separate paths during the past decades. Currently, however, as illustrated in the development of evidence-based management and as exemplified by Van de Ven's *Engaged Scholarship*, there is considerable interest among management scholars in enhanced academic-practitioner relationships. The contemporary situation offers possibilities for OD practitioner-scholars to forge much stronger links between their work and academic theory by means of facilitating academic-practitioner forums and developing skills in theorizing about them. This paper suggests some means for doing this.

Organization Management Journal (2008) 5, 6–16. doi:10.1057/omj.2008.3

Keywords: organization development; theory; practitioners; practitioner-scholar; evidence-based management



Organization
Management
Journal

Introduction

Mainstream organizational theorizing and the type of work emphasized by organization development (OD) practitioner-scholars have followed somewhat separate paths during the past several years. An opportunity currently exists to link them in ways that may be productive for both, but whether this opportunity will be taken is unknown. In this paper, after summarizing important aspects of their past and present relationships, I will suggest some possible ways to strengthen connections between them.

The relationship between organizational theory and practice has been complex for decades (cf. Tranfield and Denyer, 2004). Theory is typically seen as key to successful academic research (Sutton and Staw, 1995; Van de Ven, 2007). However, some writings for practitioners are less sanguine about the contributions of academic theory to practice. Some such writings (e.g. Haspeslagh *et al.*, 2001) discuss how, for example, what works "in theory" doesn't work "in practice." Some make distinctions between knowing and doing (e.g. Pfeffer and Sutton, 2000), arguing that theory may be good for knowing, but does not necessarily aid practice. On the other hand, some writing for practitioners argues that academic theory may be helpful for practice, and should be heeded (e.g. Christensen and Raynor, 2003). There is very little academic writing that emphasizes how practice should inform theory.



The relationship between theory and practice is particularly complex for OD and its contemporary manifestations such as large group interventions (Bunker and Alban, 2006; Holman *et al.*, 2007). OD evolved from and is a type of action research, which was originally conceived of by Kurt Lewin, its founder, as integrally and reciprocally related to theory. Lewin (1951: 169) stated, for example, that

Many psychologists working today in an applied field are keenly aware of the need for close cooperation between theoretical and applied psychology. This can be accomplished in psychology, as it has been accomplished in physics, if the theorist does not look toward applied problems with highbrow aversion and if the applied psychologist realizes that there is nothing so practical as a good theory.¹

Action research was based on the assumption that one of its outcomes would be a contribution to academic knowledge (e.g. Rapoport, 1970; Susman and Evered, 1978), and to some extent this has occurred. However, over the years, the kinds of scholarly contributions that action research and OD theorizing have made have often been in a separate sphere than much mainstream academic theorizing in management (Bartunek, 1983).² Thus, there are considerable “disconnects” between much academic theorizing and OD as it is practiced and theorized about.

This paper is addressed in particular to OD practitioner-scholars, those who see their primary contribution as practitioners, but who are also attracted to academic scholarship. In it I will discuss the relationship between academic theory and OD practice. As a prelude to the discussion, I will summarize what the term “theory” generally refers to among management scholars. Then I will summarize a few of the major currents in the evolution of the relationship between academic theory and action research/OD practice since the mid-20th century, continuing through the present and projecting into the (immediate) future. Finally, I will suggest actions that might be undertaken. While my focus within organization practice is on OD, the discussion has some relevance to management consultant practice more generally.

Prelude

What is academic theory, especially as it is used in the social sciences such as organizational research? In his recent book, Van de Ven (2007: 112) defined theory as an *explanation* of *relationships* among *concepts* or *events* within a set of *boundary conditions*. Concepts are abstract terms defined by their

association or usage with other terms that are not directly observable, events are what key actors do or what happen to them, relationships refer to categorical, disjunctive, conjunctive, and/or conditional propositions that classify concepts or events and their links, the boundary conditions are the contexts within which the relationships hold, and explanations are the arguments that provide reasons for the expected relationships.

This is a very academic description of a theory. To put it a bit more straightforwardly, take two concepts, meaningfulness and effort. A concept such as “effort” can be expressed in events such as working hard, exerting pressure, and so forth. A concept like “meaningfulness” can be expressed in a range of events that includes, among others, job activities that have a valued impact on others and activities that involve engagement with an entire work process (cf. Hackman and Oldham, 1976). A theory not only lists these concepts, it also describes their links: those whose jobs are meaningful will exert greater effort. Further, a theory explains the reasons that these two concepts are linked: meaningfulness increases effort because meaningful jobs are self-reinforcing. However, there are boundary conditions on this relationship. It is only likely to hold for those for whom the meaningfulness of a job is an important component. If the only thing that matters is the salary, then meaningfulness will exert relatively little influence on effort (cf. Hackman and Oldham, 1976). Christensen and Raynor (2003) presented additional examples of theorizing and how it is developed.

There are distinctions among types of theories. One particularly important distinction is between variance theories and process theories (Van de Ven, 2007: Chapter 5). Variance theories address the question of *what* are the antecedents or consequences of particular concepts, the variables of which statistically explain variations in other variables. In the example above, meaningfulness statistically explains variations in effort.

Process theories, in contrast, address: *How* does a particular concept emerge, develop, grow, or terminate over time? How is it, for example, that employees come to experience their job as meaningful? How is it that they come to exert effort, and does experienced meaningfulness necessarily precede effort?

Academics’ training typically focuses primarily on variance theories. In my experience, however, practitioners, including OD practitioners, are more

likely to think in terms of process models when they are considering what action to take in a system; thus, the lack of awareness of differences between variance and process theories may have contributed to disconnects between theory and practice. They are more likely to think in terms of the kinds of conditions they need to create for something to happen than about how much of a given variable will affect another variable.

With this information as background, it is appropriate to turn to some of the past relationship between academic theory and OD practice. This will, of necessity, be a very partial description. Adequately understanding academic theorizing regarding management and organizations requires much more space and a full understanding of the philosophy of science (cf. Van de Ven, 2007: Chapter 2) in order to articulate adequately. But I will touch on some issues that are particularly pertinent to the relationship between academic theorizing in management and OD practice over the past half century.

The past

It is appropriate to start discussions of management theorizing and OD practice by referring to the conceptual contributions of Kurt Lewin and to two foundation reports during the 1950s. These two reports, by the Carnegie and Ford foundations, had dramatic impacts on research and theorizing in business schools.

Lewin and field theory

Lewin (1951) was famous for his theorizing as well as for his development of action research. In fact, he had been very instrumental in the development of field theory (Lewin, 1943) prior to the creation of action research.

Briefly, as Burnes (2004) and others note, Lewin was interested in mapping out the totality and complexity of a *field*, the social environment in which individual behavior occurred. Lewin conceptualized the social environment as a dynamic field that interacted with and impacted people's awareness. Further, he argued that the environment any individual is in is always in a state of some flux. Thus, no behavior is permanent; it is, at best, in a "quasi-stable equilibrium." Thus also, if aspects of the social environment were to change, individuals' experiences would also change. Out of field theory came a very practical tool, force field analysis, which has been used for years by organi-

zation development practitioners (e.g. Schmuck *et al.*, 1972).

Based on field theory, Lewin developed a process model of planned change that included three stages – unfreezing, change, and then freezing. Lewin (1947) argued that any type of equilibrium needs to be destabilized (unfrozen) in order for change to begin. But the unfreezing is not an end in itself (Schein, 1996). Instead, there must be movement and learning away from the original quasi-stationary equilibrium in the direction of acting consistent with a new one. Finally, the new behaviors need to be refrozen, stabilized as much as possible in a new quasi-stationary equilibrium in order to endure. This model has been influential for decades in planned change research (e.g. Burnes, 2004; Buchanan *et al.*, 2005). Even though there are questions now as to how much it is possible to "refreeze" anything, given rapid changes in the world, Lewin's model is still a point of reference in the discussion.

Lewin's work, which took place in a psychology department, was strongly theory-based. But management scholarship up through the 1950s was not.

Challenges to business schools in the late 1950s

As many authors (e.g. Tranfield and Denyer, 2004; van Aken, 2004; Agarwal and Hoetker, 2007; Hambrick, 2007) have recently discussed, in the late 1950s the Ford and Carnegie foundations (Gordon and Howell, 1959; Pierson, 1959) published reports that criticized business schools "for slack standards and low quality faculties" (Agarwal and Hoetker, 2007: 1304). The reports argued that the quality of both research and teaching in business schools was very low. In response to these criticisms, business schools started hiring faculty from the basic disciplines such as psychology and sociology and, over time, increased their commitment to academic rigor and enhanced theorizing.

The shift in emphasis has been productive; many important management theories linked with empirical evidence have been developed. The theories discussed in the book *Great Minds in Management* (Smith and Hitt, 2005), for example, include, among others, social cognition, procedural justice, upper echelons theory, goal-setting theory, job characteristics theory, organizational commitment, psychological contracts, escalation of commitment, expectancy theory, resource-based theory, organizational learning, resource dependence theory, institutional theory, transaction cost theory. The theories described in the book represent



only a partial list of a number of significant conceptual contributions by management faculty during the past decades.

However, this rise in conceptual contributions has not been without its critics, especially with regard to the impact of academic theorizing on practice. Several critics have claimed that over time management scholarship has become more and more distant from managers, and certainly not of obvious help to them (e.g. Porter and McKibbin, 1988; Hambrick, 1994; Van de Ven, 2002).

Organization development contributions

During this same time period, some OD scholar-practitioners who have appointments in universities and who think of themselves primarily as academics continued Lewin's practice of theorizing in a way that is directly linked with OD and action research. This group includes, among others, Chris Argyris, Warner Burke, Bill Pasmore, Frank Friedlander, Eric Trist, Sue Mohrman, Ronald Lippitt, Ed Schein, Barbara Bunker, Bill Torbert, Phil Mirvis, Ed Lawler, Kathy Dannemiller, Bob Quinn, Bob Golembiewski, and Kim Cameron.

However, to a considerable extent, OD practitioner-scholars' work did not contribute to mainstream management theorizing. Mainstream theoretical work has contributed to OD practice (for a current example, see Marshak and Grant, 2008). But generally, practitioner-scholars' theorizing directly derived from interventions had impacts primarily within OD and its offshoots. For example, Bartunek (1983) described lack of contributions of OD practice to theory, and Argyris is the only scholar prominently identified with OD to have a chapter in the Smith and Hitt (2005) book. One of the aims of Bartunek and Louis's (1996) book was to develop ways that insider change agents could, with the help of external researchers, contribute to scholarship.

Argyris's theorizing provided a model towards which practice-based contributions to theory might aspire. His work has directly spoken to and challenged the validity of mainstream management research (e.g. Argyris, 1968, 1996). In addition, it has contributed considerably to the understanding of important dimensions of organizational life, including single- and double-loop learning (a distinction that Argyris and Schön identified), and the field of organizational learning more generally.

Argyris and Schön (1974, 1978) show that everyone, not only academics, theorizes, at least when

they are considering how they want to act in given situations. Further, they elaborated two very different types of theorizing in which individuals engage when thinking about their own actions, *espoused theories* and *theories-in-use*. Basically Argyris and Schön argued that we all operate out of theories of action, mental maps that affect how we act in particular situations. These theories in action often follow a formula like the following: to accomplish consequence *c* in situation *s*, carry out action *a*, or something like *a* (Argyris *et al.*, 1985).

Argyris and Schön (1974) argued that these theories of action, these mental maps, share the same properties as academic theories, in that they involve concepts expressed in some type of activity or event. The difference is that they are not expected to apply to all settings, but to actions the person (theorist) himself or herself is undertaking and the reasons the actions are being undertaken.

The two different forms people's theories of action take, espoused theories and theories-in-use, differ in crucial ways; the latter explains what we actually do as practitioners, and the former explains how we describe what we have done to others. How we actually behave as individuals is best described as *theories-in-use*. People's theories-in-use govern their actual behavior and tend to be tacit. The individual may well not be aware of them and they must be observed in behavior. Nevertheless, they govern the individual's actions. In contrast, the words individuals use to convey what they do can be referred to as *espoused theory*. Espoused theories are much less tacit, much more conscious. Further, they may differ considerably from the theories that actually guide behavior.

In other words, based on Argyris's and Schön's presentation, there is virtually always theory guiding practice and guiding thinking about practice, including the practice of OD. However, the theory that actually guides practice may be tacit, and may bear relatively little relationship with how practitioners articulate their own action.

To summarize this section of the paper, management scholarship, which in the early 1950s was largely free of empirically oriented theorizing, has become much more conceptually based over time. OD was theory-based from the beginning, thanks to Lewin. Some OD scholar-practitioners, most notably Argyris, contributed to academic theorizing, but during this time period most OD practitioner-scholars did not make such a contribution.

The present

Discussion among management scholars about links with practice

In recent years there has been an explosion of interest in and discussion among management scholars about relationships between management scholarship and practice. This discussion has clear relevance to OD, although OD practitioners have not often been directly involved in it. These discussions do, however, offer opportunities to OD scholarship to develop greater dialog with mainstream management theorizing.

Some of this discussion on the part of management scholars is negative. Hinings and Greenwood (2002), for example, are concerned that business school academics' close links with practice might limit scholars' capacity to criticize management practice when such criticism is appropriate.

For the most part, however, there has been increasing awareness of differences between scholarly and practitioner perspectives and desires to understand these differences more and more and reduce them. This is indicated in a number of spheres related to the work of the Academy of Management (AOM), some of which I recently summarized (Bartunek, 2007). These spheres include, among others, essays in the *Academy of Management Journal* (AMJ) about complications associated with translating research for practitioners (e.g. Gulati, 2007; Shapiro *et al.*, 2007), AOM presidential addresses (e.g. Hambrick, 1994; Huff, 2000; Van de Ven, 2002; Bartunek, 2003) that focused on this topic, writings about engaged scholarship in the *Academy of Management Review* (Van de Ven and Johnson, 2006), and a special research forum in *AMJ* on academic-practitioner knowledge translation (Rynes *et al.*, 2001).

It is not only in the AOM that there have been attempts to create stronger links between academics and practitioners. This has been illustrated as well, for example, in the British Academy of Management with respect to Mode 2 research.

In 1994, Gibbons *et al.* distinguished between Mode 1 and Mode 2 knowledge in the natural sciences. Their distinction was brought into management by Tranfield and Starkey (1998) and Starkey and Madan (2001) in a special issue of the *British Journal of Management*. Briefly, Mode 1 knowledge is what is typically created in universities using a scientific research approach. Mode 2 knowledge, in contrast, is transdisciplinary, and focuses on knowledge in practice. It aims at gaining

insights into a particular context with the view to providing a practical solution to identified problems.

There have been increasing emphases on creating academic-practitioner relationships on the part of individual scholars as well. For example, Jeffrey Pfeffer and Robert Sutton, who have been known primarily for their contributions to theory, have switched emphases considerably. In recent years they have been writing for practitioners to a considerable extent (e.g., Pfeffer and Sutton, 2000; 2006a) and have emphasized the importance of sound practice informed by scholarly research.

These are just some of the efforts to link academic theorizing and practice that are currently salient. I will discuss two important ones in more depth, because they offer particular opportunities for OD practitioner-scholars. These are evidence-based approaches as they are developing in management and Van de Ven's (2007; Van de Ven and Johnson, 2006) development of engaged scholarship.

Evidence-based, or evidence-informed management

In the past few years, building on earlier initiatives in other fields, evidence-based approaches have begun to be developed for management. Medicine was the first field to develop evidence-based approaches, but in the past decade there have been movements towards evidence-based practice in several other fields, including education, marketing, rehabilitation, psychology, conservation, librarianship, government and public policy, and social work (e.g. <http://www.evidence-basedmanagement.com/movements/index.html>). What evidence-based practice means, in large part, is the development of systematic research syntheses of what is known (and not known) about particular phenomena pertinent to some area of practice. These research syntheses need to incorporate all of the empirical studies pertinent to a specific question. Sometimes, in medicine and related fields, they also incorporate skilled clinical judgments (e.g. Rycroft-Malone *et al.*, 2004). The establishment of evidence-based practice has been accompanied by the creation of repositories of these research syntheses. These repositories include, for example, the Cochrane collaboration in health care (<http://www.cochrane.org/>) and the Campbell collaboration in education and social science (<http://www.campbellcollaboration.org/>).

Tranfield *et al.* (2003) in the UK and Pfeffer and Sutton (2006b, 2007), Rousseau, (2006) and



Rousseau *et al.* (in press) in the US have been among the early scholars to introduce evidence-based approaches in management. As they have developed it, evidence-based management refers to “translating principles based on best evidence into organizational practices. Through evidence-based management, practicing managers develop into experts who make organizational decisions informed by social science and organizational research” (Rousseau, 2006: 356). At a minimum, evidence-based management requires understanding as an expected outcome, what is expected to affect the outcome, and the ability to determine links between these, the bare bones of a conceptual model. It also involves understanding how these are consistent with “evidence” gathered elsewhere. The mission of those creating evidence-based management is to close the gap between management research and the ways practitioners make managerial and organizational decisions and educators teach organizational behavior, theory, strategy, and human resources management (Rousseau, 2006).

A small number of systematic reviews have been conducted in management. One review (Leseure *et al.*, 2004) has explored why the rate of adoption of promising practices in the UK is slower than in competitor nations. The reviewers found that, although there truly is such an adoption gap, the available evidence is not enough to discern the root causes. A second review (Pittaway *et al.*, 2004) explored the benefits of networking for business innovativeness. This study found that several potential benefits of networking, including risk sharing, obtaining access to new markets, speeding products to market and pooling complementary skills, were supported by scholarly evidence.

Efforts are underway to create more evidence-based approaches. Pfeffer and Sutton have been actively sponsoring evidence-based management (2006b; 2007; <http://www.evidence-basedmanagement.com/>). Further, under the sponsorship of the AOM and others, Denise Rousseau has created an evidence-based management collaborative that has been meeting at Carnegie-Mellon, http://wpweb2.tepper.cmu.edu/rlang/ebm_conf/links.html, and some members of the collaborative are actively working on developing means of creating and publicizing systematic reviews and developing a repository for them.

But the research syntheses are not enough by themselves. For one thing, they must be translated into actions that solve problems effectively. This

isn't always easy. Principles for action are credible only where the evidence is clear, and research findings can sometimes be difficult for both researchers and practitioners to interpret (Rousseau *et al.*, in press).

In addition, as Rynes *et al.* (2007) note, for evidence-based management to take root, it is necessary – though far from sufficient – that managers be exposed to, and willing to accept, scientific evidence. However, unlike medicine, education, or law, several of the other fields where evidence-based approaches are being implemented (p. 987):

there is no requirement that managers be exposed to scientific knowledge about management, that they pass examinations in order to become licensed to practice, or that they pursue continuing education in order to be allowed to maintain their practice. Furthermore... the first choice of most managers seeking information is to consult other managers ...and ... extremely few managers read academic publications.

For these reasons, it is not a given that practitioners will implement evidence-based knowledge or even contribute to its creation without some assistance. OD practice and theorizing could, potentially, play a central role in fostering academic–practitioner discussion about the development of research syntheses and their proper use.

Van de Ven's development of *Engaged Scholarship*

In his recent book, Van de Ven (2007: 265) has stressed, as one way of reducing the theory–practice divide, the importance of engaged scholarship, which he defines as

a participative form of research for obtaining the different perspectives of key stakeholders (researchers, users, clients, sponsors, and practitioners) in producing knowledge about complex problems. By exploiting differences in the kinds of knowledge that scholars and other stakeholders from diverse backgrounds can bring forth on a problem... engaged scholarship can produce knowledge that is more penetrating and insightful than when scholars or practitioners work on the problems alone.

Van de Ven included in his book four types of research that might fit within the category of engaged scholarship. The first is informed basic research, in which “the academic researcher adopts a detached outsider perspective of the social system being examined, but solicits advice and feedback from key stakeholders and inside informants on each of the research activities” (p. 271). The second is collaborative research, in which there is “a greater sharing of power and activities among researchers and stakeholders than informed



research. Collaborative research teams are typically composed of insiders and outsiders who jointly share in [research] activities" (p. 274). Bartunek and Louis (1996) described several ways research teams composed of insider members of an organization and outside researchers could be conducted. The third is design, or policy evaluation research, which is "undertaken to examine normative questions dealing with the design and evaluation of policies, programs, or models for solving practical problems of a profession in question. It seeks to obtain evidence-based knowledge of the efficacy or relative success of alternative solutions to applied problems" (p. 278). The fourth is action research, which "takes a clinical intervention approach to diagnose and treat a problem of a specific client, and which includes both an applied problem and intervention in a client's setting" (p. 281).

Van de Ven's book, in other words, suggests several ways that practitioners might contribute in some way to organizational research and theorizing. The third and fourth types of engaged scholarship, design research and action research are particularly close to types of work being carried out in OD among practitioner-scholars.

Design research. Herbert Simon (1996) was the first to suggest the idea of design science in his book *The Sciences of the Artificial*. There Simon distinguished between natural sciences and artificial, or design, sciences, stating that natural sciences are concerned about how things are, while design sciences (such as architecture, medicine, and management) are concerned about how things ought to be. Those who have done the most in recent years to define design approaches for management include Bate (2007), Boland (e.g. Boland and Collopy, 2004), van Aken (2004), and Romme (2003). Bate (2007) edited a special issue of the *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* that dealt with design science as a type of OD.

Knowledge from design science approaches is intended to result in what van Aken (2004) and Romme (2003) call field tested and grounded technological rules. Such tools are, essentially, illustrations of Argyris' theories of action, that is, "In situation *s*, to achieve consequence *c*, do action *a*." Technological rules are developed in part by practitioners' and academics' careful observation of experience and conducting experiments with types of actions in real time. Romme and Endenburg (2006) provided an illustration of the development and application of such rules in Endenburg's workplace.

Action research. Action research is seeing renewed life. An *Action Research* journal and an *International Journal of Action Research* have both begun in recent years, accompanying a *Handbook of Action Research* (Reason and Bradbury, 2001). Further, a second edition of a popular *Handbook of Collaborative Management Research* has recently been published (Shani *et al.*, 2008). This Handbook predominantly focuses on types of action research undertaken as collaborative efforts, which may be with large institutions as much as with individual researchers. The contributions in the book, similar to recent writings in action research, are primarily directed within rather than beyond, the realm of OD work.

While I believe strongly in the importance of practitioner-scholars making contributions beyond the realm of OD, I encountered a stark illustration of the potential difficulties of such kinds of connections at a "Nexus for Change" (www.nexusforchange.org) conference I attended last year, as I recounted in part in Bartunek (2007). The bulk of attendees at the conference were designers and facilitators of "large group," or "whole systems" planned change action research-based interventions (Bunker and Alban, 2006; Holman *et al.*, 2007).

I gave a talk to some of the conference participants about how external researchers and designers/facilitators of such interventions might collaborate with each other to study the effectiveness of the interventions using a joint insider/outsider research approach (Bartunek and Louis, 1996). One of the people who attended that talk was a woman who has designed a successful large group intervention. She came to my talk because she was interested in learning about research that could help her explore outcomes of the intervention she had designed. But while she was at my talk, she acted less confidently than she did otherwise at the conference. Terms like "research question" did not have intuitive meaning for her; rather, they seemed to evoke anxiety. Certainly, the language of variance approaches to theorizing was very different from the way she, or the other participants at my talk, designed or facilitated her large group intervention or thought about how to assess its impacts.

This woman has published a chapter about the large group intervention she designed in the Holman *et al.* (2007) book. Her chapter includes elegant figures in which I can discern process-based cause and effect patterns and feedback loops. In other words, her chapter clearly demonstrates theorizing, particularly process theorizing. Further,



in her chapter she lists several people whose theorizing has been the basis for her large group intervention. However, from the way she writes, I would be very surprised if she sees herself thinking theoretically as academics discuss such thinking.

The Holman *et al.* (2007) book, like other writings about new approaches designed by OD practitioner-scholars, makes evident that many practitioners who design change interventions are theorizing in their work, in the sense that they articulate expected outcomes of the intervention, they think out means by which these should be accomplished, and they have an understanding of why these means should work (Christensen and Raynor, 2003; Van de Ven, 2007). Thus, they certainly have well-developed espoused theories of change (and, hopefully, well developed theories-in-use as well). However, they are not describing them in the same ways that academics do. This certainly may not harm the actual intervention at all. However, it does limit possibilities for academic-practitioner dialog about the work. In particular, it limits how much OD practitioners can contribute to academic theorizing in ways that make sense to such theorizing.

In summary, at the present time there is an opening, an invitation (implicitly in some cases, explicitly in others), for OD practice and theorizing to become more engaged with mainstream work. Those involved in evidence-based management are looking for ways for it to have an impact. Van de Ven's book is inviting OD practitioners to engage with scholars. But how easy will it be for these to happen?

The (Short-term) future

The Van de Ven book is being widely discussed, in part because it comes at a time when there is so much attention to academic-practitioner relationships. The evidence-based management collaborative that Denise Rousseau convened at Carnegie-Mellon is hard at work. By the summer of 2008 it will have produced a prototype of a research synthesis. Moreover, active efforts are being made to get the AOM and the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP) formally to sponsor evidence-based approaches. To the extent these succeed, there is likely going to be much more emphasis on relationships among constructs and much more emphasis on systematic reviews of already developed knowledge.

Some possible actions

The development of evidence-based approaches provides opportunities for OD practitioners to engage much more with mainstream theorizing in ways that can be productive for both groups. It offers these opportunities in part because relatively little is known about how to create relationships among academics and management, or organizational, practitioners that will culminate in managers' clinical expertise informing the construction of syntheses. In addition, as noted above, it will not be easy to convince practitioners actually to carry out actions based on the syntheses. Skilled OD practitioner-scholars have considerable knowledge about how to foster relationships among different groups that might be helpful in these endeavors. I will suggest one possible way of doing this below. I will also suggest some ways this work may lead to conceptual contributions that may inform mainstream theorizing as well.

Linking practitioners with academics involved in research syntheses

In some other fields, as I noted above, the collection of evidence takes into account the clinical judgments of skilled practitioners as well as outcomes of rigorous research. In management there is no mechanism in place to accomplish something like this. There are not even adequate mechanisms to explore practitioner responses to synthesized evidence. One possibility is for OD practitioner-scholars, acting as boundary spanners, to undertake efforts to accomplish both of these.

I have suggested (Bartunek, 2007) that a way to build relationships between academics and practitioners is through the creation of joint forums, researcher/practitioner gatherings that might consider issues of concern to both academics and practitioners. Some examples include forums to flesh out journal articles' implications for practice and to address topics in which both academics and practitioners have interest.

It would be possible for OD practitioners to facilitate joint forums of academics and practitioners in which practitioners reflect on research evidence, contribute based on their informed experience to research syntheses, and construct with academics the implications of the research syntheses for practice. After there is a chance to implement actions suggested by the research syntheses, forums could take place in which academics and practitioners reflect on the success

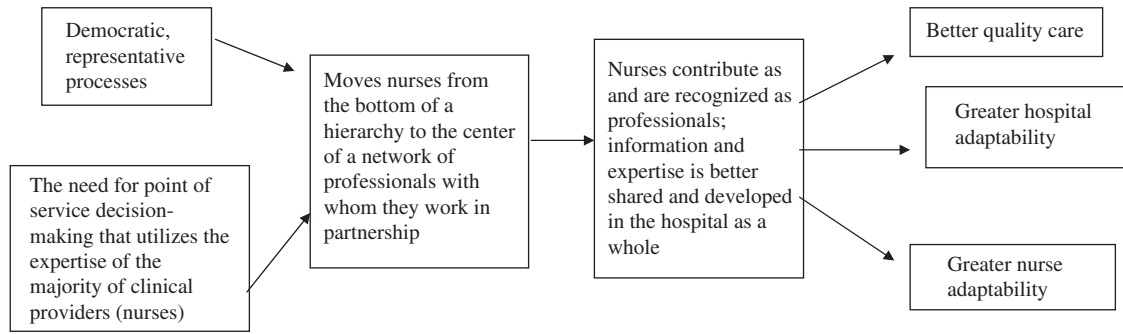


Figure 1 Schematic summary of Porter O’Grady model of shared governance from Bartunek *et al.* (2006).

of applying research-based knowledge as well as the complications encountered.

Such forums provide a way to take both groups’ perspectives seriously, and provide means of enhancing the development of evidence and its implications for practice. However, they would not be easy to accomplish well. Thus, this is one area in which OD practitioner skill might be very crucial. These forums represent just one example of a way of linking practitioners with evidence-based researchers. There are undoubtedly many additional means that skilled OD practitioner-scholars might design.

Regardless of the specific design, however, if developing ways to link practitioners and academics concerning evidence and its possible impacts is going to have a substantial impact on academics beyond their participation in evidence-related sessions, it is going to have to come bundled with theorizing. Otherwise, it will not be taken seriously as an academic contribution.

This means that OD practitioner-scholars who design and implement such sessions need to be cognizant as much as possible of the conceptual rationales (both in-use and espoused) underlying the design and implementation of such sessions, and to be able to use the sessions as a means of testing the rationale. The articulation of what is practiced in terms of a theory does not necessarily need to be done solely by the OD practitioner; it may be done in collaboration with an academic (Bartunek and Louis, 1996) who is able to appreciate the practice and its theoretical base. But developing such a rationale is crucial.

For example, Porter O’Grady (1994) and his associates have developed a model of shared governance, a type of OD intervention for hospital nurses. Descriptions of shared governance have primarily been in nursing journals. However,

shared governance is an interesting organizational intervention that can be easily presented in a schematic form consistent with academic theorizing, as illustrated in Figure 1 (taken from Bartunek *et al.*, 2006). This kind of schematic model helps to foster understanding of how both to implement shared governance and assess it in ways that both academics and practitioners can understand. If one looks at the Porter O’Grady model as pictured in the figure, for example, one can see that shared governance in nursing can be linked with a range of studies that focus on democratic processes, empowerment, status structures, the professionalization of a profession, and a variety of interesting outcomes that include adaptability and quality.

Thus, to the extent that OD practitioner-scholars can articulate conceptually what they are doing in developing academic-practitioner forums regarding evidence, they can open their work to a wide range of scholarly conversations to which they can contribute and from which they can learn. Thus, they would not only be making a practice-based contribution to evidence-based management, but also responding to Van de Ven’s (2007) invitation for their practice-based work to contribute to management scholarship.

In conclusion, we are in a period that offers invitations to OD practitioner-scholars to think in terms of and contribute both their practice and scholarship to a scholarly and practitioner community beyond the realm of OD. The possible rewards of such thinking can be considerable for academics, for practitioners, and for practitioner-scholars themselves.

Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to Shanthi Gopalakrishnan for her assistance.



Notes

¹While Lewin emphasized the interplay of theory and practice, there is some evidence that he did not entirely live it. Cooke (2007) recently explored Lewin's FBI case file that was created as part of a US government job for which Lewin had applied. The case file includes an interview with a neighbor of Lewin's in Palo Alto. The neighbor (Cooke, 2007: 447): "further advised that the applicant is an intellectual and a theorist; that he does not have the ability to handle practical problems and that because of these reasons would be inclined to instill his doctrines by

literary means and lectures ... [Deleted] went on to say ... because the applicant absolutely has not the ability to make practical decisions and because he is politically sympathetic towards radicalism, he would hesitate to recommend the applicant notwithstanding the belief that the applicant would not make a practical application of his sympathies".

²By mainstream I do not necessarily mean positivist (Susman and Evered, 1978). I mean the variety of theoretical presentations that are presented in highly regarded academic journals.

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