

# The gap between academics and practitioners is a reflection of the underlying tensions of academic belonging.

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**Jean M. Bartunek** and **Sara L. Rynes** note the recent spike in journal articles across management scholarship seeking to address the divide between academics and practitioners. Whilst there remains relatively little empirical research focused on the issue of a gap, significant attention has been placed on understanding the variety of reasons for the divide. But what is being written probably reflects gaps within academia itself more than it reflects gaps between practitioners and academics. Discussion of the gap often signals underlying tensions about how much and where particular academics feel they belong or not.

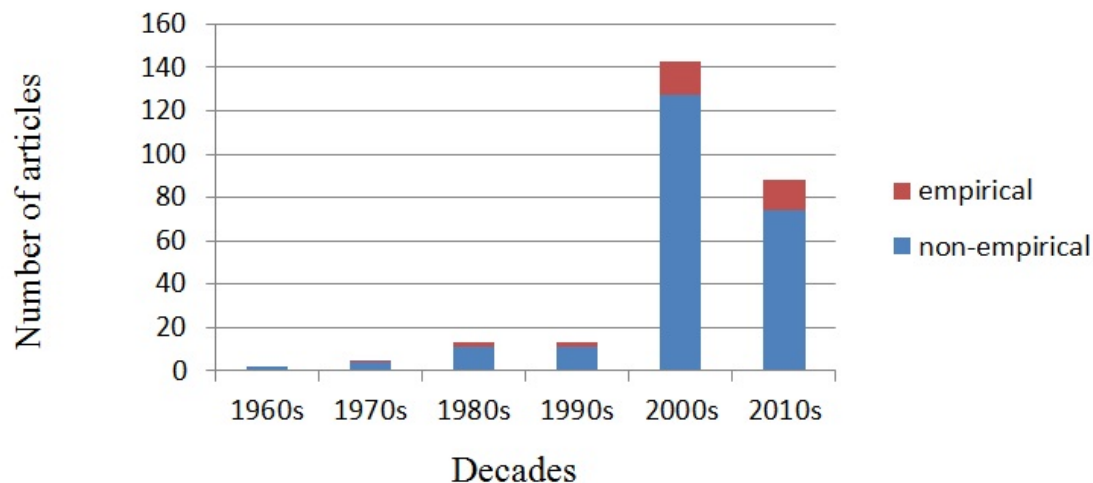


The existence of a “gap” between management scholarship and management practice is taken for granted these days, so much so that what this gap actually signifies is often not attended to at all. Not only has it remained present to management scholars for more than fifty years, if the frequency with which academics have been writing about the gap is any indication, it is becoming more salient.



The graph below shows the number of empirical and non-empirical articles on the management academic- management practitioner gap appearing in management journals in ten-year time blocks from the 1960s through September 2013. As the graph makes evident, attention to this topic has been skyrocketing during the early part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Articles in Management Journals addressing academic-practitioner relationships



**Source:** Bartunek & Rynes, 2014, *Journal of Management* online appendix, [doi:10.1177/0149206314529160](https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206314529160)

Many of the articles are opinion pieces about whether or not practitioners and academics truly can and should share information and collaborate with each other. As the graph shows, there is very little empirical research addressing the issue. Proportionally, the number of journal articles that describe empirical research is not increasing as rapidly as the number of essays and opinion pieces.

What about this topic is attracting so much attention? And what is significant about the attention it is getting? Many of the articles suggest reasons for the gap. One reason is that the ways academics and practitioners think about many issues is very different. A second is that academics' time horizons are much longer than practitioners; while practitioners often need to make decisions quickly, academic research typically takes a much longer time. Yet another is that academics and practitioners use different types of communication styles; the language in academic articles often isn't very readable by practitioners. Next, while some groups of academics advocate strongly that in order to be rigorous, research cannot be relevant, other academics counter that rigor and relevance are very compatible. Finally, academia and management practice often have different incentives. Publishing a scholarly article is more of an incentive for an academic than a practitioner, while solving a particularly crucial business problem is more of an incentive to a practitioner.

These reasons for the gap may not seem so surprising. However, we also found that almost all of the writing about whether the gap should be bridged is being done by academics, more specifically by what Ranjay Gulati referred to as "[tribes](#)" of academics. In other words, what is being written probably reflects gaps within academia itself more than it reflects gaps between practitioners and academics.



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Further, the gap is a quite emotionally laden topic for many academics participating in discussions about it. Their exchanges with each other about the gap are sometimes very heated. Indeed, the two of us found ourselves getting into heated exchanges with each other as we were writing the essay we summarize here, even though we largely agreed with each other. Fortunately, we were able to recognize that the disagreements we were having paralleled the conflicts and tensions that are often expressed in debates about the gap.

There is some movement regarding the gap. In particular, there are several incentives emerging that can make bridging the gap more attractive to academics. In the UK the most important is the new [Research Excellence Framework](#) (REF) that replaces the former Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) to measure the quality of research in UK universities. Unlike the RAE, the REF includes an assessment of the impact of scholarly research on practice, i.e. its reach and significance. Government attempts like this will undoubtedly increase academics' attention to the relevance of their research, regardless of whether they think that relevance is compatible with rigor.

What should happen now in academic writing? Should academics affirm or disaffirm the gap? We believe that the correct choice is “neither”. The standard ways of thinking about the gap have largely outlived its usefulness, and the recent arguments for and against academic-practitioner collaboration are no longer advancing understanding. Rather, it is more productive to think about what dynamics are underneath the gap, and why they keep coming up.

We believe that the gap is actually a surface manifestation of deep tensions that are present among academics. We noted earlier that there is often conflict about the gap between particular academic tribes. These tribes are scholarly communities for academics, and one of the ways the academics signal their belonging in their tribe is in their claims about the gap and what should be done. Thus, discussion of the gap often signals underlying tensions about how much and where particular academics feel they *belong* or not. It also signals ongoing underlying tensions about *performance*, due to frequent disagreements between academic tribes regarding what the focus of scholarly work should be.

Both the belonging and performance tensions are paradoxical. That is, they reflect tensions that are virtually always present in organizational settings in one way or another. It is not possible to resolve these tensions. Further, the gap is a convenient culprit for discussing them.

Recognition and focus on the underlying tensions themselves, on belongingness and contradictory performance pressures, can serve to move the discussion forward far better than ongoing fights about the gap can. It can lead to greater awareness of complicated challenges involved when there are competing pressures about performance, as well as to greater awareness of what it means to “belong” at work.

Ironically, these are tensions and pressures experienced by academics and practitioners alike. If we dig far enough beneath the gap it may actually enable ways to link academics and practitioners, rather than separate them.

*Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.*

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