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POINT
COUNTERPOINT

Introduction: Can We Bridge the Rigour–Relevance Gap?

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INTRODUCTION

The following series of articles emanate from a session held at the first *Journal of Management Studies* Conference on the theme of 'Beyond knowledge management: advancing the organizational knowledge research agenda'. The conference was concerned to advance academic understanding of this broad topic and in addition to reflect on the role of management scholars as creators, commodifiers and disseminators of management and organizational knowledge. The latter theme arose from debates in relation to the apparent marginality of business school academics in the production of management knowledge (Barley et al., 1988; Gibson and Tesone, 2001; Spell, 2001) and their consequent (in)ability to develop and conduct research with practitioners and then communicate the results of this research to a practising audience. Drawing on Shapiro et al. (2007, p. 249), this broad debate can be framed as either a 'knowledge transfer problem' (what they term 'lost *in* translation') or a 'knowledge production problem' (what they 'lost *before* translation'). In the former the solution is to produce publications and outlets that are designed to be attractive to and easily accessed by practitioners. In the latter, the solution involves collaboration between academics and practitioners at different key stages of the research process (Pettigrew, 1997). In the papers that follow the nature of the management research–practice gap is debated as well as the helpfulness and viability of various solutions aimed at narrowing it.

Drawing on Luhmann's (1995) systems theory, Kieser and Leiner (2009) argue that the rigour–relevance gap 'is not only attributable to different languages and styles in the scientific community, but also to different logics – to differences in defining and tackling problems – that prevail in the systems of science and practice' (Kieser and Leiner, 2009, p. 517). For them 'science' and 'practice' operate according to completely separate institutional logics, with the consequence that the communication of knowledge from one

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system can never be absorbed by the other. Given that these two systems are unable to communicate with one another, for Kieser and Leiner attempts to attempts to 'bridge the gap' (i.e. through the development of different kinds of collaboration between members of the two systems) are viewed as inevitably futile and as offering a 'false hope'. In contrast, Hodgkinson and Rousseau (2009) argue that management is a broad discipline and whilst the gaps between research and practice in some areas may be large, in others there are numerous examples of successful collaboration that has underpinned development of high quality research and outputs. They argue that 'developing deep partnerships between academics and practitioners, supported by appropriate training in theory and research methods, can yield outcomes that meet the twin imperatives of high quality scholarship and social usefulness, to the mutual benefit of both agendas, without compromising the needs of either party in the relationship' (Hodgkinson and Rousseau, 2009, p. 538). For them bridging the gap is at the heart of the contemporary management academic role since such cross-fertilization can lead to richer and more detailed understandings of organizations. As they conclude, 'science and practice will not be worse for their collaboration. On the contrary, to some degree they will be *different*, by virtue of their mutual enrichment' (Hodgkinson and Rousseau, 2009, p. 543). Starkey et al. (2009) adopt a broader approach to Kieser and Leiner's central concern by examining issues in relation to epistemology and political science to argue that: (1) 'there is a proliferation of different modes of inquiry' with the consequence that a range of 'versions of science are possible' (Starkey et al., 2009, p. 548), not just the view held by Kieser and Leiner; (2) in aping more traditional and modernist models of science, management as a discipline 'has sought rigour over relevance, leaving translation to others such as management consultants and management gurus' (Starkey et al., 2009, p. 552); and (3) a range of contextual pressures may modify the social organization of the discipline with the consequence that relevance may take greater prominence than it does at present. Noting the danger of an overly narrow conception of rigour and relevance, they conclude that by framing management as a 'design science' will alter the nature of interactions between researchers and practitioners with the consequence that 'new things are likely to happen, new forms of practice, new kinds of communication, new codes' (Starkey et al., 2009, p. 554).

In the remainder of this article we identify a number of points that both complement and extend some of the arguments made in response to Kieser and Leiner's initial paper.

TAKEN TOO FAR?

Kieser and Leiner's account of the rigour–relevance gap represents a particular view on an issue that has been perplexing management academics for some time (see *British Journal of Management*, Special Issue, **12**, 1, 2001; see also Rynes et al., 2001; Shapiro et al., 2007; Van de Ven, 2007). The perception that managers often pay little attention to the theories and findings that as academics we craft so painstakingly – and frequently as fairly explicit offerings to those struggling with the daily problems of decision making – envisages a bleak future for management education and the business schools. For some writers like Starkey and Madan (2001), this is more of a relevance gap, to which the response should be about widening the disciplinary base in order to improve knowledge creation and the dissemination of research. While managers may need to be involved more sympathetically in the process of academic research, aligning the interests of business and academia means the latter has to move the greater distance and better reflect user interests.

For Kieser and Leiner, the differences between the two realms are more systemic and the pull of academic rigour is the main issue. At the heart of their account is the notion of a potentially unbridgeable void between academia and practice. For management and organization theory this means that academically rigorous research cannot be pragmatically relevant. Kieser and Leiner arrive at this position by way of an analysis that stresses the impossibility of true collaboration between the separate systems of science and practice. This position in turn arises from the particular interpretation of systems theory that they derive from Luhmann (1995) and his argument that all distinct systems have such pronounced internal logics as to exclude all possibility of communication or collaboration between them. This 'core assumption of Luhmann's theory' (Kieser and Leiner, 2009, p. 519) leads to an unbridgeable gap between academic theorizing about organizations and the subject of its study. The academic research code of pursuing truth and critical purity automatically excludes it from the realm of practice.

There is certainly an important point here regarding the integrity of belief systems and the autonomy of distinct spheres of knowledge and action. Furthermore, Kieser and Leiner highlight important issues in relation to shifting sources of legitimacy for academic knowledge and how scholars should or should not respond. They are not alone in arguing that the two systems should remain distinct. We see a similar position, for example, in Grey's (2001) insistence that by remaining independent of corporate goals and interests universities are able to 'freely experiment' with new ideas, with the consequence that 'the production of useless knowledge is a public good because it is the price to pay for the possibility of producing useful knowledge' (Grey, 2001, p. S29). Keeping the systems separate therefore maintains a key historical role of universities. Blurring the two realms will, in Grey's view, limit the type of knowledge universities develop and many potentially useful ideas for practice will be lost. We also see echoes of Kieser and Leiner's argument in Astley and Zummato's (1992) characterization of management research and practice as founded on two 'distinct linguistic traditions . . . The language games adopted by the two communities have their own internal dynamics and history, and each focuses attention on quite different problems and issues' (p. 444). The fact that this is such a debated topic suggests that as a community of scholars we recognize that we face an important but difficult challenge that questions a number of values we hold dear.

Whilst we sympathize with a number of points made by Kieser and Leiner, nevertheless we believe there are also problems with this interpretation of systems theory and how it impacts on management knowledge. From the Kieser and Leiner perspective the closed nature of social systems which is given the status of totemic fact means a rigid internal cohesion and specificity. Yet one might ask whether systems have such impermeable boundaries and whether the parties on either side of the rigour–relevance gap are actually separate and distinct as characterized. We would argue there is greater cross-fertilization between the systems than Kieser and Leiner imply. This is suggested, for example, by recent accounts of the production of management knowledge. New management ideas have been seen to emanate from an 'arena' (Abrahamson, 1996) or 'field' of social actors (Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall, 2002) comprising figures like consulting firms, celebrity managers and gurus, business schools and management academics. In other words, ideas are the produce of a context in which 'relevance' is a integral component, and academic and pragmatic systems exist under one umbrella (see also Clark, 2004; Ernst and Kieser, 2002; Heusinkveld and Benders, 2002). The combinations of knowledge and 'co-evolution' of new management ideas often come about as academics observe practice and formulate popular ideas in ways that are inherently attractive to and accessible by managers in terms of their preferences for the nature and format of information (Huczynski, 1993).

Once produced, management ideas must be legitimized if they are to travel; they have to have relevance and speak to a broad audience. Though they may lag behind influences like consultants and the business media, business-school academics may still be active in developing concepts in use. For example, Suddaby and Greenwood (2001, p. 936) argue that a kind of 'due diligence' is performed by the consolidation of management ideas when 'business schools . . . provide a forum for sober second thought, where managerial knowledge is evaluated and refined'. So while one might conceptualize rigid roles for academics and practitioners, the reality seems more mixed. There are also other crossovers and examples of multiple roles. Some successful management gurus are or were academics, and academics also pursue second careers as consultants. In each case they make their supposed esoteric knowledge portable so that it may be translated and reused in a range of situations. The resulting package often lacks situational precision but such qualities may ensure that knowledge is adaptable to organizational contexts. In this sense, different kinds of 'knowledge' are appropriate to different audiences, and what is produced for peer review and journal publication may be too narrow a conception of the academic role.

Another limitation may be a too-tight focus on research and a failure to recognize the dialogue in the classroom as communication between proto systems. While the tendency is to bemoan academia's lack of practical influence, the dominant factor over the past 20 years has been the expansion of business education. Groups like consultants and novelties like the corporate university may threaten the business-school monopoly (Starkey, 2001), but a significant proportion of future management is still passing through the university system – and the demand for and status of this knowledge can be influenced by the academic community in its role of training more critically aware consumers of management ideas. Although Kieser and Leiner suggest that only types of conformist knowledge will gain wider acceptance, it may be pessimistic to assume this, or indeed that practical problems should necessarily determine the kinds of knowledge universities generate and pass on. Knowledge that conforms to the conventional requirements of a managerial audience ignores broader social trends and is removed from values that underpin highly-regarded academic writing. As Grey (2001, pp. S28–9) suggests, the critical role of universities and the knowledge produced within them is of most importance as a long-term guarantee of relevance and status, and this may displace short-term striving for managerially appealing ideas. In academia, interaction between the teaching role and research – the transmission of knowledge based on critical independent thinking – may even alter the perceptions of knowledge and enhance the valuation of academic competencies by altering the receptiveness of managerial audiences.

A further shortcoming of 'systems' thinking is that it can be too generalizing and aggregating – anything in nature and society can be called 'a system' – and the systemic approach seems to lead to a conflation of terms and categories. Following Luhmann's analysis, Kieser and Leiner use 'science' to refer to any theoretical subject, yet surely there are major distinctions between the natural sciences and social sciences. The currency of natural science is law-like motion, while the social sciences deal in meaning and social construction; and using a natural-science model to derive conclusions for social science is likely to lead to confusion. It may be true that the natural sciences are more like conservative closed systems (Kuhn's normal science) but the social sciences have wider affinities with social commentary and permit greater diversity. Kieser and Leiner stress the *self-referential* nature of the system of science – how it only permits research that refers back to existing theory to enter the body of the subject. They are particularly concerned to highlight a bias against multidisciplinary and non-positivist research (their main interest is action research) and the failure of this to get onto the academic high ground and into the most prestigious journals. An assumption that the strictures of the (natural) sciences are applied in management science means a tendency to keep out practitioner-oriented action research from prestigious journals.

But surely the social sciences are not so hegemonic and seem less inclined to deny the possibility of diversity and ongoing critique and management and organization theory that derives from social science has always had critical work going on alongside positive research. For example, currents such as Labour Process Theory and Critical Management Studies have been influential in Europe and the UK (if less so in the USA). We therefore suggest that the systemic view should not be taken to extremes. Kieser and Leiner are concerned about a conservatism that means critical research might be denied a voice, but distinctions between a world whose code is the pursuit of 'truth' and another world coded to the practical solution seems to us the wrong place to draw the line. Management studies as a social science has wider external affinities and greater diversity, and is less of a closed system than natural science, and any relative inability to communicate with practice may derive from other sources – perhaps the nature of management itself as an uncertain activity where there are no ultimate answers or design solutions.

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