

# **Academic–Practitioner Relationships**

Developments, Complexities and  
Opportunities

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# 1 Reviewing the state of academic practitioner relationships

*Jean M. Bartunek and Jane McKenzie*

## Overview introduction

Welcome to this book—a combined presentation by all the authors and editors—that showcases the contemporary vitality of academic–practitioner relationships and partnerships and suggests future steps.

We begin our introduction with a value proposition. As social scientists who focus on management and organizations our role is to deliver research that makes a positive difference to business, to an array of organizations and to the wider society. But this cannot be done except in partnership with those (typically referred to by academics as practitioners) who carry out the kinds of work that organizational research addresses. To put it another way, organizational and management research should deliver the broadest value to society when theory and research are useful for improving organizational practice *and* the reality of practice truly informs theorizing.

This is not a new claim: Kurt Lewin (1951: 169) made a similar argument for psychology more than six decades ago:

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 high-brow aversion or with a fear of social problems, and if the applied psychologist realizes that there is nothing so practical as a good theory.

But what such an accomplishment means in management practice and academia has not been adequately recognized in either theory or practice. Rather, scholarly practice for producing rigorous and relevant theory in working relationships with practitioners has been a contested topic within the halls of academe (e.g., Banks, Pollack, Bochantin, Kirkman, Whelpley & O’Boyle, 2016; Bartunek & Rynes, 2014; Bennis & O’Toole, 2005; Daft & Lewin, 2008; Empson, 2013; Kieser & Leiner, 2009; Rynes, Bartunek & Daft, 2001). Some academics (e.g., Daft & Lewin, 2008) have argued strongly against it; others (e.g., Bennis & O’Toole, 2005) have argued strongly for it. As a signal of its importance, it has recently been recognized as one of the grand challenges of our current age (Banks et al., 2016).

*The importance of the metaphor of interfaces for academic–practitioner relationships*

In discussions of academic–practitioner relationships terms such as “gap” and “divide” are the metaphors most used to describe them. Further, some suggest that the gap is widening (Banks et al., 2016). Many who label themselves scholar–practitioners feel caught in the middle of the gap, without an adequate sense of community on either side (Empson, 2013; Kram, Wasserman & Yip, 2012). For many, consideration of the possibility of academic–practitioner relationships has evoked considerable ambiguity and anxiety. It has even generated rival tribes of academics (Gulati, 2007).

Outside of academe, executives, middle managers, consultants, change agents, and other practitioners are less interested in the debate, but much more interested in timely, reliable, and accessible work that helps them deliver better outcomes. Some practitioners are baffled by the gap, do not label themselves as practitioners, and see such discussions as irrelevant. For them, the way research is conducted, published, and conveyed—how new important knowledge is developed—shapes their perspective on its value and consequent utility and uptake.

However, during the past decade, helped considerably by Van de Ven’s (2007) conception of “engaged scholarship” and by multiple initiatives undertaken by a variety of academics and practitioners in many countries, there has also come to be much more optimism about the possibilities and potentials in academic–practitioner relationships, a greater awareness of the possibilities and potentials of them, and how important and productive these may be for both constituencies and their larger societies. Shani, Mohrman, Pasmore, Stymne and Adler’s (2008) *Handbook of Collaborative Research* provided a comprehensive guide to the tools and techniques in use in collaborative research. Mohrman and Lawler (2011) edited a book on *Useful Research: Advancing Theory and Practice* which discussed a number of dimensions of research that are useful for practice. It includes discussions of books, organization development practice, collaborative research and some illustrative collaborations. And, of course, there are several older books that have helped set directions for collaboration.

This work makes evident that the often used metaphor of a gap, despite its continuing ubiquity (e.g., Banks et al., 2016), is, in some ways at least, outmoded. Given the advances that have been taking place, the image it presents is no longer adequate. The term “interface” is probably much more appropriate (Rau, Möslin & Neyer, 2016); it refers not only to a gap or a wall separating groups, but an interconnection between them (Kulik, 2016). According to the Oxford English Dictionary, for example, while the term *interface* originally referred to “A surface lying between two portions of matter or space, and forming their common boundary,” it has also come to refer to “a means or place of interaction between two systems, organizations, etc.; a meeting-point or common ground between two parties, systems, or disciplines; also, interaction, liaison, dialogue.” The term conveys great energy for relationships between parties such as academics and practitioners. In fact, a good deal of work has

gone into creating a range of interactions, meeting points, and common ground between academics and practitioners (e.g., Bartunek, 2007). We suggest here that the term *interface* is a much better metaphor than gap for links between academics and practitioners.

### ***What this book contributes***

However, there have been very few occasions for presenting a full portrait of the progress being made in *thinking* about academic–practitioner partnerships, in *developing the skills* to carry them out successfully, and in showcasing a wide range of *successful examples* of such partnerships. Presenting these is the purpose of this book. In it we offer a concise and up-to-date review of scholarly engagement with the world of management, one which builds on engaged scholarship, and connects it to the capabilities and practical experience of creating productive collaborative relationships.

The chapters in this book examine how understandings of collaborative academic–practitioner relationships have evolved in recent years, elaborate conceptual challenges that create tensions in academic–practitioner relationships, discuss the sorts of capability academics need to collaborate effectively with practitioners given the conflicting expectations and constraints inherent in their different worlds, and illustrate good practice through case studies occurring at acknowledged centers of excellence.

### ***For whom might this book be helpful?***

This book is an important contribution to the mounting interest in such collaborations. It responds to the growing number of universities that have recognized that they need scholars with the capabilities necessary to operate effectively in two worlds: successfully building a solid academic track record in publication and a reputation for high-quality theoretically grounded empirical research, along with sustainable collaborative relationships with organizational practitioners to enhance the relevance and impact of their research (for which others have argued, cf. Banks et al., 2016). It also speaks to governments, work organizations, community agencies, and others that may be interested in creating collaborations with academics who might be able to help them achieve their purposes more effectively, that may, in other words, contribute to the impact of academic work (MacIntosh, Beech, Bartunek, Mason, Cooke & Denyer, 2017). The initiative for collaboration can come from managers and other practitioners, not just academics.

This book is also a provocation and guide for individual scholars learning to navigate the complexity involved in academic–practitioner interfaces, as well as a reference book for interested practitioners who want to learn more about how working more closely with academics can enhance their effectiveness. Many students and faculty working in DBA or other types of practitioner doctoral programs may find it particularly helpful.