MANAGEMENT RESEARCHER UNDERSTANDINGS OF THE RESEARCH-PRACTICE RELATIONSHIP

By
Hassan Abu Bakar, Richard Ferrers, Tim Kastelle,
Jane O'Leary & Sandeep Salunke

Abstract

In this paper, we seek to provide management researchers and practitioners with a deeper understanding of the relationship between management research and practice. We begin by surveying relevant literature in the area to identify what we understand to-date about this phenomena. Subsequently, we report on the process and findings of a phenomenographic research study examining management researchers' understandings of the research-practice relationship. The paper concludes by discussing how the findings provide us with a deeper understanding of the management research-practice relationship and the implications of this for management researchers and business schools in higher education. The results of the study indicate that the relationship between research and practice is substantially more complex than preconceptions would suggest. The dominant view in the literature to-date suggests there is simply a direct link where research can (or should) contribute directly to practice. However, our findings show that theory plays an equal role, with a variety of the configurations of the relationships between research, theory and practice.

Introduction

Management is an applied field, there being an intimate connection with practice which is not always there in, for example, the natural sciences. This means that one of the key criteria by which we evaluate the outcomes of management research must be what impact it has on management practice (Griseri, 2002).

While always in the background of applied fields such management, education and health, the 'research-practice' debate has gained prominence in recent times with changes in business context. Today's organisations struggle to survive and thrive in a business context which is no longer stable and predictable but instead marked by environmental turbulence, discontinuous change and uncertainty (Limerick, Cunnington & Crowther, 1998). In this context, management researchers (and indeed managerial practitioners) have begun to ask, to what extent does current academic research contribute to managerial practice? (See for example: Rynes, Bartunek & Daft, 2001 and the inaugural issue of European Management Review, 2004 for overviews).

While there is a great deal of talk about the need for management research that informs practice, there is little said about how to generate such research or, indeed, develop researchers who are capable of generating such research. There are increasingly persistent calls to increase the practical relevance of management studies (Brown, 1996; Czarniawska, 1999; Jacques, 1996; Westney, 1997), but less in the way of practical steps that can be taken by higher education institutes or individual researchers that may improve the situation (ironically, many of the papers are theoretical rather than practical!) Work that undertakes to develop an understanding of the way in which management researchers themselves conceive the relationship of their work to the practice of management will help address this theoretical gap. Not only will it improve our understanding of the nature of the theory-practice relationship, it will also provide insight into how this relationship can be best navigated and, if relevant, improvements facilitated. The study's practical contributions subsequently become apparent in exploring implications of this deeper understanding for researchers, research students, business schools and managerial practitioners.

What does the Literature tell us about this Phenomenon?

When examining the literature in this area, two key themes emerge – firstly, the debate concerning the challenges of balancing academic validity with practitioner utility and, secondly, a questioning of the prevalence and relevance of rationalist instrumental reasoning in management research.

Validity versus Utility

Management is an applied field, and in any applied field in the social sciences there exists a love-hate relationship between practice and theory (Westney, 1997). This arises from the notoriously wide gap that exists between the academic (natural science) demand for 'truthfulness' and the practitioner's need for 'utility' (Griseri, 2002: 39):

> The more easily understood and directly applicable an idea, the less likely it is to have a solid body of supporting evidence. The more precisely defined an idea and the more closely and soundly it is supported by evidence, the less applicable it is to general practise.

With this in mind, how then, does the kind of knowledge that is produced compare with the kind that is used in practice and to what extent have academics bridged the two? Research suggests there is a notoriously wide gap between the two (Griseri, 2002; Jacques, 1996; Sinclair, 2004).

According to Rumelt, Schendel & Teece (1994: 18), for instance, even the forefathers of strategy (i.e. Chandler, Andrews and Ansoff) only ever had an audience of students and professors and none of them directly and immediately influenced practice. Similar claims have been made in other disciplines including, for example, marketing. Here, the postmodernist theorist Brown (1996: 185) argues that marketing scholarship has achieved very little of practical, implementable worth. He accuses marketing of engaging in an ill-advised quest for scientific respectability which has served merely to alienate its principal constituents, managers. And he draws our attention to the fact that it is "almost inconceivable" that a paper by a marketing manager would appear in premier academic outlets, let alone that practising managers would turn to these journals for guidance.

Much of the 'research-practice' debate highlights and explores the respective roles of academics and researchers (Czarniawska, 1999; Jacques, 1996) and other external players such as consultants (Gummesson, 1991; Czarniawska, 2004). Czarniawska (1999: 8), for instance, suggests revising roles such that we conceive managerial practice as "institutionalised action" and managerial theory as "institutionalised reflection." Here, the role of academics in the management discipline becomes to inspire alternative visions of managerial practice rather than produce better theories of action. As the author herself notes, "as theoreticians, we should be telling practitioners about what they could never come to think of themselves, and not about what they know already and better." Similarly, Jacques (1996: 7) suggests "blending" the poles of the traditional theorist/practitioner dichotomy through questioning basic values and assumptions underlying management problems being studied. Here, key actors in the management discipline must become "applied philosophers" engaging in critically reflexive practice so that they become both theoretical practitioners and practical theoreticians.

Relevance of Rationalist Research for Managerial Practice

The second key theme to emerge in the literature relates to a questioning of the prevalence and relevance of rationalist instrumental reasoning in management research. Management research and theory has developed on the back of a functionalist worldview that emphasises the rational and orderly nature of organisations (Clegg & Hardy, 1999). Based on a normal science model, a functionalist worldview focuses on rationality (no contradictions), impersonality (the more objective, the better) and prediction and control of events or phenomena being studied (McCarl Nielsen, 1990). Viewed through such a looking glass, 'management' becomes the rational deterministic pursuit of planning, co-ordinating and controlling organisational 'resources'.

While recent decades have witnessed the emergence of "contra science" approaches to management research and theory, such as interpretivism, critical theory and postmodernism (Marsden & Townley, 1999), whether or not such approaches have become 'mainstreamed' into academic thought and managerial practice is another thing all together. A review of *Administrative Science Quarterly* published articles, highlights that it is positivism that remains the dominant lens through which

management researchers and theorists view the world today (Clegg & Hardy, 1999: 7).

And yet in recent times, the relevance of such rationalist instrumental reasoning for managerial practitioners and organisations more generally has been repeatedly questioned. Alvesson and Deetz (2000: 89), for instance, question the misguided assumption that modern corporations are consist of workers who are rational and reflective agents capable of acting autonomously and coherently. While Limerick et al. (1998: 245) point to the irony that management theory, with so many of its roots in organisational psychology and organisational behaviour, should, of all disciplines remain wedded to a paradigm that treats people as variables within causal systems. In a similar vein, Limerick and O'Leary (2004: 2) argue that "hygienic" positivist research (Stanley & Wise, 1983) fails to hold its own in the face of a postcorporate era, marked by rapid, cataclysmic change where the only certainty is that organisational structures, operations and practices are certain to change. They find that, in the diverse postcorporate workplaces of today, it becomes imperative that research processes able to work with, and respond to, issues of multiplicity, subjectivity, relationality and (shifting) power.

Thus, the literature in the area views the gap between management research and practice as a key concern for the field, highlighting in particular the conflicting demands of balancing validity and utility and questioning the relevance of rationalist research approaches for management practitioners. Moreover, this literature appears to be primarily theoretical rather than empirical in nature.

Our Research Question

To date there have been theoretical discussions of the need for a 'practice turn' in management research (Whittington, 2004). Evidently, this debate has implications not just for management researchers themselves, but also for management 'researchers-in-training' (ie postgraduate research students) and business schools in higher education institutions. These implications were touched on in a special issue of British Journal of Management in 2001, which started to take a closer look at how to redefine the business school agenda in order to better serve practitioners. However,

the rather prescriptive articles in this issue were primarily concerned with programmatic changes at the level of institutions, there being little emphasis on the understandings that individual researchers have about the practical significance of their own research. We feel that this is a critical first step. If the business schools are to take the call to improve practical relevance seriously, changes must start at the level of individuals – whether this be management researchers or their 'apprentices', management postgraduate research students. Therefore, our research question is: 'What are management researchers' understandings of research's contribution to practice?'

Examining the 'Research-Practice' Relationship

Adopting a Social Constructionist Approach

Our research question concerns itself with investigating the understandings and experiences of individuals – concerns shared by, and in alignment with, social constructionism (Schwandt, 1998). Social constructionists argue reality is socially constructed by continuous negotiation between people about what their reality is, and human descriptions are always coloured by specific historical, cultural and linguistic understandings of reality (Sandberg, 2001a; Daniels, Spiker & Papa, 1997).

Consequently, constructionist approaches adopt a non-dualist ontology, where research subjects and objects are inseparable (Giorgi, 1994). In this view, there are no objective 'facts' available to study (or to uncover), everything that researchers learn is influenced by theory. The epistemology in these approaches ranges from those that are quite relativistic, such as discourse analysis and post-structuralism, to those that can be more realist in nature, such as phenomenography and ethnography. In the latter approaches, social reality is constructed, but its intersubjective nature means that "we, to a large extent, reproduce rather than produce reality" (Sandberg, 1997, p. 32). The one consistent factor is that the constructionist epistemologies do not use a correspondence theory of truth, but rather that truth is derived from the intentional relationship between observer and observed (Sandberg, 2005).

Using Phenomenography

This research examines the management research-practice relationship using phenomenography, as an alternative to the prevalent rationalistic methodologies in management research. Phenomenography is an interpretative research orientation which describes conceptions, or differing ways in which people experience, perceive, understand or conceptualise various phenomena in the world around (Marton, 1981; Marton, 1986). Phenomenographic empirical studies have shown that whatever phenomena is considered, a limited number of qualitatively different and logically interrelated ways in which the phenomena is experienced or understood can be identified (Marton, Dall'Alba & Beaty, 1992). These range of ways in which people experience the same phenomenon are referred to variously as conceptions (Marton, 1981), understandings (Sandberg, 2001b), or categories (Walsh, 2000) and can be presented in the form of categories of descriptions (Sandberg, 1997). Subsequently, logical relations between these understandings can be examined to identify different capabilities for understanding the research phenomena. In doing this, a hierarchy or ordered complex of understandings, called 'the outcome space' (Akerlind, 2002) can be established. The outcome space provides an instrument for characterising, in qualitative terms, variations in understandings, in this case, of how researchers understand the research-practice relationship.

Phenomenography is well suited to studying situations where it is expected that people will have a variety of understandings of a particular phenomenon, and that these differing understandings will lead to differences in action (Ashworth & Lucas, 2000). Our research question reflects precisely this type of situation, and so phenomenography is an appropriate research method to adopt.

Method

Selecting Participants

If this had been a full scale study, we would have selected 20 to 25 staff to participate in the research in order to reach theoretical saturation (Alexandersson, 1994 (quoted in Sandberg, 1997); Giorgi, 1994). However, due to time, resource and access

constraints, we interviewed only five participants. Again, had this been a full study, we would have surveyed the full range of academic researchers, from experienced full professors to apprentice researchers (postgraduate students) in order to capture the greatest possible variation in understandings and experiences of the research-practice relationship phenomena. However, due to the foresaid issues, we instead focused on advanced doctoral students. Since these researchers are still 'in training', it seemed plausible that they may be most susceptible to changing their research approaches to accommodate the practice turn. If this objective is to be achieved, it is critical to develop a more accurate picture of the understandings that this group has with regard to the practical use to which their research can be put. Therefore, our sample frame included UQBS PhD students who had completed their coursework and confirmation process (or were on the verge of doing so). This allowed us to talk to a group of people who were all at roughly the same stage in their research career. From within this group, we used theoretical sampling in an effort to obtain the widest range of variation in views possible (Ashworth & Lucas, 2000). We selected five PhD students who varied across the dimensions of age, sex, cultural background, work experience, research methodology and meta-theoretical commitments.

Collecting Data

In conducting the interviews, we tried to follow the interview techniques recommended by Walsh (2000), Sandberg (1994) and Kvale (1996). While there is significant variation in the methods used by phenomenographic researchers (Dall'Alba, 2000), interview techniques are relatively standard. Interviews are semi-structured, usually consisting of two or three questions, which are examined through an interview lasting from 30 minutes to as long as several hours. Time, resource and access constraints resulted in us limiting interviews to 30 minutes. We used the following interview questions during this time:

> What is your understanding of the relationship between management research and practice?
>
> How does your research contribute to management practice?

These questions were explored to achieve greater detail and verified with follow-up questions. For example, questions such as 'Did you think about contribution to

management practices in your research?', 'Can you explain that further?', and 'Can you give an example of that?' were posed to obtain practical examples of participants' real experiences and detailed information on what their statements meant in terms of their 'real-life' day-to-day practice. This dialectical process continued until we made no further progress, or we reached thirty minutes.

The interviews were audio-taped and subsequently transcribed (each by the interviewer who conducted the particular interview). Since the objective of analysis was to assess meaning, rather than performing a more technical analysis (i.e. sociolinguistics), pauses, ummms, and most repetitions were edited out during the transcription (Kvale, 1996: 170-1). In doing this, all efforts were made to do justice to the interviewees in recognition that the transition from a conversation to a text can be problematic (Poland, 1995). The transcriptions, as well as a sample of the consent form, are included as Appendix 1.

Analysing the Data

A phenomenographic analysis uses a series of interactive steps to identify 'categories of description' and an ensuing 'outcome of space.' These interactive steps are commonly run through several times, with each consecutive step being considered in the context of the steps that follow and precede (Ashworth & Lucas, 2000; Sandberg, 1994). The analysis aims to identify similarities and differences between the ways in which a given phenomena is understood or conceived by research participants. This entails describing, grouping and systematically relating participants' conceptions, using 'categories of descriptions'. In summarising some main characteristics of individuals' conceptions, and some main similarities and differences between individuals' conceptions, the categories characterise the variation in how the phenomena is understood or conceptualised by participants.

In keeping with a phenomenographic approach, and to ground the outcome space in the data and allow greater sensitivity to the full range of meaning existing in the data, phenomenographic researchers do not define categories of descriptions beforehand but instead allow them to emerge from the empirical data (Marton, 1986; Svensson, 1997). Other researchers are known to draw on the literature first to create theoretical

categories (e.g. Bowden, 2000). Such an approach is taken in order to more effectively ground the outcome within the existing research stream. In this study, however, the former approach is used. This debate between whether or not categories are applied to or derived from the data is probably the most contentious issue among phenomenographic researchers (Akerlind, 2002; Bruce, 2002; Dall'Alba, 2000).

Another controversial debate within the phenomenography literature is how much of the transcript should be used as an analytical unit. Some use all or most of the transcript (e.g. Prosser, 1994), while others select smaller parts of the transcript, usually a series of key quotations to build up a decontextualised pool of meanings (e.g. Marton, 1986). The advantage to the first approach is that it is easier to retain the context of the transcripts, though the size of the analytical units is unwieldy. The advantage to the second approach is that it allows a finer-grained analysis, and for variation of views within interviews, while also making the data easier to work with. We felt that the finer analysis and better ease of use in the second approach made it preferable. However, we tried to stay mindful of the dangers of decontextualising the data.

Our analytical approach enabled categories to be built iteratively from the ground up. The first step was to read the transcripts multiple times. Once a familiarity with the complete transcripts was established, the transcripts were searched systematically for discussions of the relationship between theory and practice. These formed our base analytical units, and we have called them attributes.

Once the attributes were identified, we tried to build common themes that linked them together. Our initial thought was that these were the final categories. We built ten of these 'categories'. However, through further iterations with the data, we realised that these were in fact what Akerlind (2003) and others refer to as dimensions - intermediate constructs that in turn constitute the categories of understanding. These included:

1. researchers as theory builders

2. researchers as process builders

3. researchers as problem solvers

4. researchers as teachers/trainers

5. researchers as change agents/catalysts

6. researchers as simplifiers of theory for practitioners

7. researchers as compelled to interact with practice

8. researchers' potential to impact on practice

9. practitioners as theory builders, and

10. researchers and practitioners as independent of, or parallel to each other (detailed descriptions of each dimension are included in Appendix 2).

Once we realised this, a further iteration of data analysis yielded three related but distinct categories of understanding held by our interviewees. We then connected each of the interviewees with one of the categories: Theory Focus, Integrative Focus, and Power/Change Focus (these are described in detail in the Results section below). At this point, the preliminary results were reported to a group of our peers. The feedback received on this occasion suggests that the results have communicative validity, as this group (consisting of higher degree research students and one senior academic) seemed to be able to relate the categories described to their own research experiences.

Afterwards, we continued to work with the data. We next tried to assign each dimension to a particular category (see figure in Appendix 3 for details). In doing so, we discovered that several dimensions seemed to apply to more than one category. Since we had also assigned interviewees to each dimension, this meant that we could no longer cleanly sort the interviewees by category. While there are a couple of phenomenographic studies that have allowed dimensions to split across categories (Akerlind, 2003; Akerlind & Kayrooz, 2003), the bulk of phenomenographic researchers seek to avoid such situations. Therefore, we took a closer look at the original contexts of the attributes that contributed to the problematic dimensions. In doing so, we discovered that the most likely reason for the boundary-crossing dimensions was that we did not have a full grasp of the intention behind the original

quote. This is one of the dangers of analysing from a pool of meanings rather than the transcripts as complete entities.

An example of the way in which these conflicts were resolved is in the treatment of the idea that research outcomes should be measurable, which was expressed in somewhat similar terms in two different interviews. However, by investigating the context of the quotes, we determined that the two interviewees attached different meanings to the idea. In one case, 'measurable' was used to refer to the need to develop theory that had reliable and valid measures, while in the second, 'measurable' was used to refer to research having a noticeable impact on profitability. So even though both people were talking about the need for their research to have measurable results, they were actually discussing quite different things: scientific validity versus practical application.

Our Findings

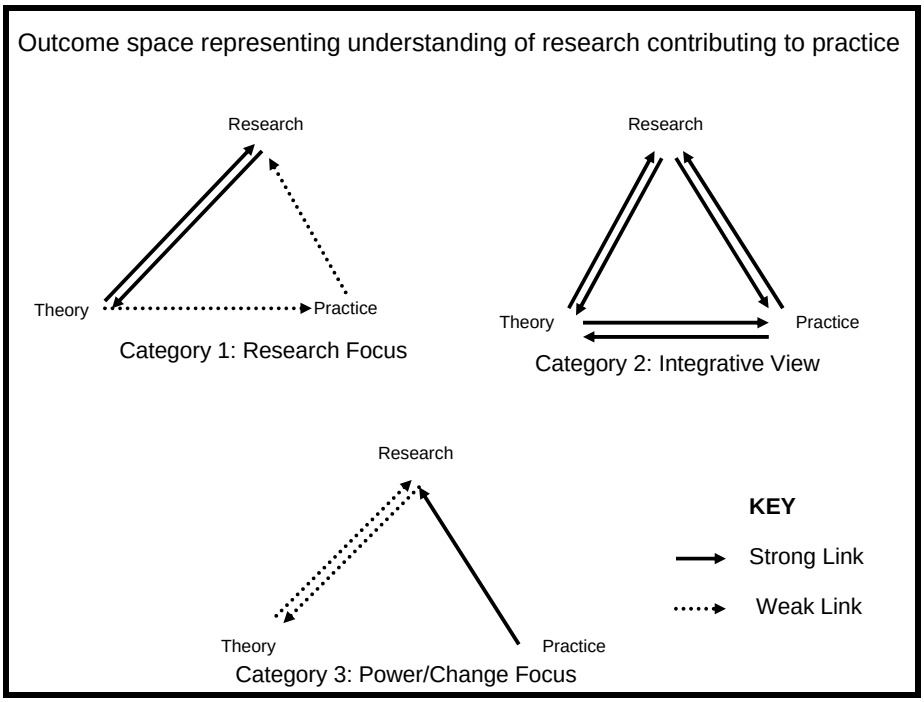

Figure 1: The Categories

We found three categories of understanding of the relationship between management research and practice. Originally, we thought that the relationship between the research and practice was linear and unidirectional, and that there either was a

connection between the two in peoples' minds or there was not. However, it quickly became apparent in reading the interviews that there is a third element involved: theory. Our interviewees had one of three understandings of the relationships between research, theory and practice.

Category 1 Theory Focus – This relates to those researchers focussed more on theory, and theory drives what they are researching. There is only a weak link to practice, which they talk about as a 'possible link' or potential future link. Three of our interviewees are in this category. In general, their research questions are driven by theory, although there may be a weak link to practical experience. The most salient feature of researchers in this group is the idea that they contribute to practice by contributing to theory first. For example:

> I: And what about your, what you are researching in terms of how its going to, we are going to look at how it might affect practice and the way people do things, you want to have a think about that?
>
> M1: I think in some ways that from the outset I would not say that my research not trying to shoot myself in the foot does not have much to do with the practice of management. I see that the usefulness the validity of my type of research in practice is more at in terms of actually understanding people in the workplace…… (Transcript 3, page 1, line 14 – 20)

A recurring theme within this group is the need to make a solid theoretical contribution:

> I: So what is your general idea of how it should be-academic research contributing to management practice?
>
> A: What my research is -- providing a theoretical basis or theoretical grounding of why those things (aspects) happen. If you knew how they happen then you knew how manipulate them so that they happen again and again and again. But to go one step deeper and to find a justification for… things that happen—that's the aim (Transcript 1, pages 3 line 41-42, page 4 line 10 – 13).

When discussing the prospects of interacting directly with practitioners, this was viewed as something that they 'ought' to do, rather than as something that was a primary objective in their work.

Category 2 Integrative Focus – This relates to a complex interaction between research, theory and practice, where theory relates to both research and practice, and research is driven by both theory and practice. One interviewee is in this category. The links between research, theory and practice are all strong, with a vigorous view of the role taken by practitioners in the research process.

> I: Do you think that… that practitioners pay attention to research when they're out managing? When they're trying to win, or trying to use the resources efficiently, or all the things they're doing on a day to day basis?
>
> M2: I think that managers, or directors, are more theorists than the theorists themselves, the academics. Because, they're trying to guess, or to predict the situation, or to describe the situation, to describe, to explain about relationships between two factors, or cause and effect, and they try to modify, to, introducing new regulations, new procedures, routines, new strategy. They are actually making theories! Building theories first (yep) and then put it in a, what should I say, put it in their decisions. For that reason I think – there are two levels now, normatively, managers, or directors, should base their actions, or their managerial decisions, on research. I think they have to have these capabilities (Transcript 4, page 1, line 23 – 34).

However, this researcher still viewed his contribution to practice as going through theory first. In contrast to the Theory Focus though, he sees it as part of his job as a researcher to create theory that can be used by managers:

> M2: Well, in my research, first I have to find the answer of this… yes. And then, I hope, this research result can be easily transferred into tools. And then managers can use that to solve their problems, their daily problems. Maybe (Transcript 4, page 4, line 34 – 36).

Category 3 Power/Change Focus– This relates to a strong separation between research and practice, concerned about the power of practice to set a research 'agenda', and whether there should be a link at all or whether a focus on academic independence is preferable. Theory takes a significantly lesser role here. One interviewee is in this category. As shown in Figure 1, this person is at a crossroads in the research process. His original idea was that practice should inform research, and the results of research should feed directly back into practice, in the form of driving change. However, at this point in time, he is not sure how to proceed:

> I: And if that's what your understanding and aspiration is, to adopt a critical approach which does result in change, what's been your experience to-date of that happening? And in terms of change, I mean very broadly, in the broader sense of change…
>
> R: My experience is that in order to facilitate this change you really have to challenge people's underlying assumptions and that is just incredibly difficult and I'm not too sure how to do that (Transcript 5 page 6 line 10 – 17).

Because of power differentials, he has come to the conclusion that research and practice need to be kept separate:

> I: When you think about the relationship between theory and practice, or the contribution of theory to managerial practice, what's your understanding or experience of that?
>
> R: I would say that in my experience the two tend to be very separate and more separate than I think they should be. That the research community, if I can call it that, and the professional community, sorry the practitioner community, tend to keep each other apart and happily and purposively so. With some exceptions but in general I would say that the two are rather separate and indeed that that hinders a lot of progress (Transcript 5, page 1, line 4 – 9).

Consequently, his model has changed: there originally was a strong link back from the researcher to the practitioner, which has now been removed. As there are relatively weak links between research and theory in this understanding, this has left the interviewee questioning the point of his research.

The three categories can be summarised as shown in Table 1.

	Category 1	Category 2	Category 3
Proposed name	**Theory focus**	**Integrative Focus**	**Power / change focus**
Alternate names		Systemic, dynamic interaction, or practice focus	
Focus	Theory	Practice	Separation of research and practice
View of contribution	Potential rather than actual	Optimistic	Pessimistic
Connection of research and practice	Weak separation	Integration	Strong separation
Interviewees with this Understanding	S, H1, M1	M2	R

Table 1: Characteristics of Categories of the Outcome Space

Trustworthiness of the Results: Reflecting on Validity and Reliability

Before the data were collected, a validity and reliability assessment was undertaken to highlight the issues which posed threats to validity and reliability, and which therefore require bracketing (Ashworth & Lucas, 2000). Issues such as sampling risk, interviewer bias and other presuppositions led to action points to reduce the risk during the research process. We were sensitive to the need to apply processes to reduce the risk both during the interviews, and analysis phases.

Qualitative research views 'reliability' as the use of suitable methodological procedures to obtain consistency and quality in data interpretations (Kvale, 1996), while 'validity' in qualitative studies refers to the degree to which the research findings is actually representative of the phenomenon being investigated (Akerlind, 2002). The aim of phenomenography is to understand people's lived experience of the world in the context of the phenomenon being investigated (Bowden, 2000). In order to deal with these issues, we have used four criteria to justify interpretation, these being communicative validity, pragmatic validity, transgressive validity and reliability as 'interpretative awareness'. The three forms of validity form a mutually reinforcing

interpretive framework (Sandberg, 2005). While communicative validity focuses on interpretive coherence and grounding in the data, pragmatic validity addresses the data's consistency with action, and transgressive validity focuses on possible contradictions, recognising our limited ability to make our actions coherent in language. Each form of validity has strengths and weaknesses, and using the three together provides a more stable support structure for the qualitative analysis of data (Sandberg, 2005).

Communicative Validity

Communicative validity involves testing the validity of knowledge claims in a dialogue (Kvale, 1996). This implies that the validity of an interpretation is worked out in a dialogue between the researchers and in between the interviewee and the interviewer (the two points of 'knowledge claims'). Before interviewing we had short discussions with the interviewees to ensure they understood the phenomenon we wished to focus on, and that we were interested in their understanding of that phenomenon guided by two open ended principal questions. The two interview questions had been agreed on in advance, but with scope and flexibility to explore issues as they arose. Furthermore, communicative validity was also achieved in the following three ways. First, three researchers read through the transcripts independently. This was followed by an extensive debate and dialogue about individual understandings of the phenomena. Each of the researchers defended and argued their understandings until a consensual agreement was reached. Second, a preliminary presentation was done to a group consisting of advanced research students and a phenomenographic expert to obtain feedback about the researcher's consensual understandings. Finally, feedback was also obtained from interviewees on the representation of their understandings.

Pragmatic Validity

Pragmatic validity includes the extent to which the research outcomes are seen as useful and meaningful to their intended audience and addresses the data's consistency with action (Kvale, 1996). Following Sandberg (2000), pragmatic validity was achieved by continually pushing interviewees towards examples of past experience where the understandings were enacted. Interviewees were also asked questions that

demonstrated their understanding of research to management practice. Additionally, interviewees' reactions to interpretations of their statements were observed (refer Transcript 5, page 4, line 8-21).

Transgressive Validity

Transgressive validity means going beyond coherent structure in building interpretations to include noticing "irresolvable contradictions and tensions" (Sandberg 2005). It is uncertain that all the potential conclusions have been discovered from the data, in this limited study. A full study would continue analysing the data until the results produced reached a saturation point, where no new results emerged from the data. Another doubt is that it is difficult to be certain that the results produced are not projected from the researchers. Also, alternate meanings could have been reached from the same data by other researchers, or by ourselves at other times. While we are confident that our processes have helped reduce this risk, it cannot be easily eliminated.

Reliability

Reliability means a consistent pattern observed in the research findings (Kvale, 1996). Reliability as interpretive awareness means acknowledging that researchers cannot escape from their own interpretations, but must explicitly deal with them throughout the research process (Sandberg, 2000). In this study, reliability was driven by 'what' and 'how' questions (rather than explanation seeking 'why' questions) to focus on interviewee understandings of the phenomenon. Interpretative awareness was maintained though bracketing researchers' preconceptions, using how and what questions, and treating all statements equally (Sandberg, 2000). Furthermore, all comments were given equal weighting. For instance, when a statement clashed with a researcher's opinion, the other researchers identified this and the importance was equalised. During the analysis phase, individual researchers analysed the transcripts before coming together to discuss, negotiate and integrate the interpretations. A focus was to ground the interpretations in the words of the transcript but to also capture the overall understanding behind the words, expressed in the researcher's words rather than limited to quotations. The literature team were not involved until late in the analysis stage.

Sandberg (1997) argues that interjudge reliability is derived from an objectivistic epistemology within the positivistic research tradition. Interjudge reliability is the use of a second coder to look at phenomenographic data to see if they find the same categories as the original coder. The categories are provided as part of the process. This process may be unreliable if the data is poor, or coloured by the researcher's pre-understanding, or superficial, so general categories are found rather than a specific conception. However Sandberg (1997) claims that the basis of phenomenography is a 'phenomenological epistemology', that is a subjective conception of reality, thus alternate processes of reliability are required. Consistent with this view of Sandberg (2000), interpretative awareness is suggested as a substitute. Here, the subjectivity of the interpretation must be dealt with, identified, controlled and checked. Sandberg (1997) suggests five steps to bracket prior knowledge, in what he calls 'phenomenological reduction'. The steps include:

1. 'being open'
2. describe, but not go beyond, the experience described
3. 'treat all individuals as equally important' which he calls 'horizontilisation'
4. look for structure to the meaning, and keep exploring alternative interpretations until a conception 'has been stabilised'
5. use what and how the reality is conceived to correlate the description with reality.

Based on the five steps above, the 'epistemology of intentionality underlying phenomenography' is stressed, to achieve 'reliability' (Sandberg, 1997). Therefore, we adopted the five steps to deal with the issue of reliability. Furthermore, these five steps enabled us to check and recheck the reliability and validity issues in conducting research, as many scholars put emphasis of these two important issues in conducting research.

Discussion

These results have a number of implications – all of which offer greater understanding of the nature of the theory-practice relationship, and insight into how this relationship can best be navigated.

The Current Gap Between Theory and Practice

The first of these is that, according to research participants, a gap does exist between research and practice, with all interviewees freely acknowledging its existence and discussing their understanding and experience of this. Such a finding comes as little surprise given frequent citations in the literature of the existence of a gap between research and practice (Jarzabkowski, 2004; Nicolai, 2004).

Whether or not such a gap is desirable is debated both within the literature and by participants within this study. Support for the separation of research and practice can be found in the literature, which refers to concerns that practical outcomes reduce the scientific validity of management research, and that explicit and tangible links between practice and research are therefore best avoided (Staw, 1980, quoted in McKelvey, 1982).

These views are indicative of a more restrictive version of the Theory Focus understanding, and it is possible that such views could emerge from a larger interview pool. Support for a separation was, however, evident in one interviewee holding the Power/Change understanding. In his case, he had come to feel quite strongly that if research does have a practical outcome, this only further supports the disparity in power that currently exists between owners/managers and workers and community stakeholders. Accordingly, he endorsed a separation to enable research to retain its academic independence and thus remain uncontaminated by business' commercial profit-based agenda. In contrast, all remaining interviewees expressed support for a better bridging of the gap between research and practice.

What is interesting about this study's findings is that, despite the majority of interviewees 'voting' for a closer research- practice relationship, a gap between research and practice appears likely to continue. The majority of researchers in this study had an understanding similar to the Theory Focus, in which theory drives the

research, there is only a weak link to practice and contribution to practice is made indirectly by researchers first and foremost contributing to theory. With such an understanding in mind, a gap between research and practice will continue to exist, regardless of whether researchers feel it should or not. Expanding this research may well provide insight into the relative abundance of researchers holding each understanding, but our sense of it is that this category is the predominant one.

Shifting the Focus: From 'Should We?' to 'How Do We?'

If, as our interviewees do, we believe a closer relationship between research and practice is desirable, further exhortations for researchers to provide practical applications of their work are unlikely to be effective (e.g. Brown, 1996). All of the interviewees in the Theory Focus category expressed an interest in providing a contribution to practice through their research. In some cases, they felt this was desirable, while in others they felt as though they 'ought' to contribute to practice. In any case, since the view that there 'should' be a relationship between research and practice forms part of the understanding, further calls for a stronger practice orientation are unlikely to be effective. The focus needs to shift from illustrating the need for a practice focus to figuring out ways to implement a practice focus (Bourdieu, 1990).

Facilitating a Closer Research-Practice Relationship

The outcomes of this study suggest several ways to implement a shift towards a practice focus. The first is to explicitly and directly link research questions to practice. In doing this, researchers would find research motivation through the identification of practical problems to be solved, rather than through the identification of gaps in the current literature. The idea is that this would build a more direct link between researchers and practitioners at the start of the research process, with the hope that this will lead to a stronger return link once the research has been completed. Obviously, this is a fairly large assumption. The implications of this are widespread. This approach will require changes to the way that research is evaluated, from the examination of PhD theses all the way through to the peer review process in journals.

A second approach is to introduce research training programs that are directly linked to the production of results that are of use to practitioners. Some universities have

tried to do this through the introduction of Doctorate of Business Administration (DBA) degrees (Lockhart & Stablein, 2002). The focus in these degrees is to develop research streams that produce results that are directly relevant to practitioners. It appears as though the majority of DBA graduates go back into business, rather than into full time research careers. This may reinforce the practitioner-research links identified in the Integrative Focus in this study. However, in order for this initiative to have a broader impact within academe, the same issues of training and peer review raised above will have to be addressed.

A third avenue which can be pursued is to take steps to enrich the view of practitioners taken by those who hold a Theory Focus. Gaining an appreciation for the complexity and challenges inherent in managing may make it more appealing for academics to interact with practitioners. It seems obvious, but taking steps to increase the amount of interaction between researchers and practitioners should lead to more practically oriented research outcomes. This idea could be tested by investigating the impact of the huge increase in MBA enrolments over the past 30 years on the types of research undertaken by those that interact regularly with MBA students.

A fourth, more radical approach involves deconstructing business school and university agendas and their competitive differentiation strategies. This would involve the re-evaluation of academic recruitment, promotion and tenure incentives, and the alignment between the goals of universities, business schools, academics and the outside stakeholders. This requires substantial changes to the structural and contextual drivers of academic behaviour.

There are many other similar ideas that can be investigated (e.g. early stage identification of new research candidates' understandings, matching candidates and supervisors for compatible understandings etc). However, in all cases, this study suggests that in order to increase the practical applicability of management research, effort must be put into increasing the strength of links between researchers and practitioners. In turn, this may have profound impacts on the way in which researchers are trained, as well as the way that research itself is assessed.

Conclusion

In this paper, we sought to provide management researchers and practitioners with a deeper understanding of the relationship between management research and practice by reviewing relevant literature in the area and using a phenomenographic qualitative research approach to explore PhD students' understandings of the research-practice relationship. Our research identified three categories of understanding of the relationship between management research and practice. Originally, we had thought that the relationship between the two was unidirectional and linear, and that there either was a connection between the two in peoples' minds or there was not. However, our iterative analysis approach resulted in a third element emerging from the interviews, this being 'theory'. Thus, final analysis indicated interviewees had one of three understandings of the relationships between research, theory and practice – these being 'theory-focus', 'integrative-focus' and 'power/change-focus'.

The study findings and the literature both point to the existence of a gap between management research and practice and debate about the desirability of this. Our findings suggest that such a gap is likely to continue given the apparent dominance of researchers' theory-driven understanding of the research-practice relationship. We believe, given regular and consistent calls in the literature to close the research-practice gap, the focus in the literature needs to shift from illustrating the need for a practice focus to figuring out ways to implement a practice focus. We concluded by making preliminary suggestions for how such a 'practice turn' may be best facilitated. Thus, this paper provides both theoretical and practical contributions. Firstly, it responds to a gap in the literature in the field, providing a theoretical contribution consisting of the provision of empirical research material examining researchers' understandings and experiences of the research-practice relationship. Secondly, this empirical material enables us to highlight how business schools may assist researchers and research students generate research capable of providing a more meaningful contribution to managerial practice.

Appendix 1: Transcriptions & Consent Form

Appendix 2: Detailed Descriptions of Each Dimension

As mentioned above the doctoral students are 'researchers-in-training'. Since these researchers are still 'in training', it seems they should be the most susceptible to changing their research approaches to accommodate the management practice turn. Given these conditions, how can research students understand their research according to the management practices? In our interpretation, ten qualitatively different dimensions appeared of researchers' understanding and experience of research's contribution to management practices. These were:

1. researchers as theory builders
2. researchers as process builders
3. researchers as problem solvers
4. researchers as teachers/trainers
5. researchers as change agent/catalyst
6. researchers as simplifiers of theory for practitioners
7. researchers as compelled to interact with practice
8. researchers' potential to impact on practice
9. practitioners as theory builders, and
10. researchers and practitioners as independent of, or parallel to each other

Within each dimension, it is possible to distinguish several essential attributes of research / practice relationship. More specifically, each dimension is characterised by a specific structure of attributes that appears as the researcher's understanding of how research contributes to management practice. The way each dimension and its key attributes form a distinctive structure of research contribution to management practice is summarised in Table 2 and elaborated below.

Dimensions	**Dimensions**
1. Research as theory building a. Understanding phenomenon b. Research for the sake of research 2. Process building a. R->P: research should impact practice b. Value to practices c. Tangible d. Valuable e. Measurable f. Intervention programme 3. Problem solving a. Practice as measurable b. Research as deeper c. Tool makers d. R -> P: research should impact practice e. Research deeper than practices 4. Teaching / training a. Staff training b. Student training c. Other training 5. Change / catalyst a. Change management perceptions b. "Bridge the gap" c. Application (only) of research is a contribution to management = actually change d. Change by challenging assumptions Key: R – research, P - practice	6. Simplification a. Eg AMJ to HBR b. Toolmakers / toolbuilders c. Simple, efficient, effective d. Communicate / connect P to R e. Simplicity f. Complexity (separation by language) 7. Compulsion a. Forced to interact with practice b. Compulsion 8. Potential to impact practice a. Potential to practice b. Can be applied to recruitment and managerial outcomes 9. Practitioners / practice as theory building a. P = R (practitioner is a researcher) b. Implied that certain things not taken account of in research eg risk, gut / experience 10. Independent / parallel a. Connect or separation between research and practice is contextual b. Research = personally incompatible with practice c. Frustration by practices resistance to change (futility) d. Shift in attitude from R should contribute P to R disconnected from P

Table 2: The Dimensions of Ten Distinctive Structures of Research Student Understanding of Research's Contribution to Management Practices (this uses the terminology from an intermediate point in the analysis)

Dimension 1: Researchers as Theory Builders

The characteristic feature of this dimension is that the researchers believe that research contribution to management practices is understanding a phenomenon and research for the sake of research. The following discussion demonstrates this - which developed out of the key question "What is your understanding of the relationship between research and practice?" For example:

> I: What do you think of your research heading towards that goal (to management practices)?
> A: I am looking at the behaviour of the customers rather than any managerial input but the outcome of that is that we can create an environment where customers enjoy themselves, they come back they will tell other people how good the place was, they will come back (Transcript 1, page 1 line 8-13).

Dimension 2: Researchers as Process Builders

The characteristics of this dimension are that the researchers understand their research contribution to management practice as value to practice, tangible, valuable, measurable and for example, creating an intervention program and focuses more on application of research to management practice. This category was captured based on

both our two principle questions, "What is your understanding of the relationship between research and practice?" and "What is your experience of research contribution to management practices?", for example:

> I: I guess what I am trying to ask is what you are saying practical outcome but you seem I'm not quite to have this idea of what practical outcome means in your head and can I (I guess) I'm trying to pin you down into what you actually mean there
> M1: …..to me a practical outcome for my research and that perhaps is an expectation of myself rather than of or is a definition of what a practical outcome would mean that it actually changes something in the way that the organisation operates the way the managers operated that something actually changes and with any luck is made for the better (Transcript 3, page 5, line 38–42, page 6, line 1-14).

Dimension 3: Research and Practice as Problem Solving

The characteristics of this dimension are that the researchers understand research contribution to management practice as something that can be measurable because research is deeper than practices and research outcomes should translate as tools to assist practitioners in problem solving and decision making. This dimension was captured out of our second principle question. "What is your experience of research contribution to management practices?" For example:

> I: Well, that's a real issue, in that particular field, isn't it? (yes) Because the, all the dynamic capabilities literature, even at a theoretical level, people can't agree what they're talking about. (right) So how can we make that practical for managers if, if the academics are still having real problems in saying, well, this is what we're talking about?
> M2: Heh, when I was a manager, what I would always do, when I went to a conference, I always tried to push the presenters to put those theories or findings into tools. (yeah) So, I think, ok, I agree with your findings, but can you give me the tools that derive form your theory? (Transcript 4, page 4 line 30 – 33)
> I: Do you think that's the way to do it? To translate that theory into tools? Is that the way you think about it in your research?
> M2: Well, in my research, first I have to find the answer of this… yes. And then, I hope, this research result can be easily transferred into tools. And then managers can use that to solve their problems, their daily problems. Maybe. (Transcript 4, page 4 line 21– 36)

Dimension 4: Researcher as Teacher / Trainer

The characteristic of this dimension is that the researchers understand research contribution to management practice as something that can be used in staff and

student training. This training therefore, they believe, will bridge the gap between academic research and management practice. This was captured from our two principle questions "What is your understanding of the relationship between research and practice? and "What is your experience of research contribution to management practices? For example:

> I: What is difficulty in maintaining the relationship between theory and practice?
> H: I think the major problem is because I perceive myself as academic teacher and researcher. As researcher I need to discover and push the limits and built up the understanding and I will use this finding in my teaching (Transcript 2 page 1 line 39–41, page 2, line 1).
> I: What is your experience linking management research and management practices?
> H: Like right now I am working with Queensland government to enhance this type of study in Brisbane especially and this is good way to explore the management perspectives in the quality and effectiveness of leadership in the organization. So that I can contribute in term of training for the managers and my research may identify potential problem in the organization (Transcript 2, page 2 line 9-16).

Dimension 5: Researcher as Change Agent/ Catalyst

The characteristic of this dimension is that the researchers understand research contribution to management practice as changing perceptions of management with regards to academic research. In addition, the researchers also believe that only application of research is a contribution to management practice, as opposed to mere talking. This category was captured based on our first principle question "What is your experience of research contribution to management practices?" For example:

> I: And if that's what your understanding and aspiration is, to adopt a critical approach which does result in change, what's been your experience to-date of that happening? And in terms of change, I mean very broadly, in the broader sense of change…
> R: My experience is that in order to facilitate this change you really have to challenge people's underlying assumptions and that is just incredibly difficult and I'm not too sure how to do that (Transcript 5 page 6 line 10 – 7).

Dimension 6: Researchers as Simplifiers of Theory for Practitioners

The characteristic of this dimension is that the researchers believe that research can contribute to management practice if the research can be translated into an simple, efficient and effective way that the practitioner can use it for their daily work. This dimension was captured by asking "What is your experience of research contribution to management practices?" For example:

> I: What practitioners think of your research?
> H: I think we can't use academic languages to convey the messages to them but we have to make the knowledge, I mean the way of dissemination, what I will use is Bar and pie chart and use more simple language - I mean day to day language, and explain why is this so important, what is the indications that use for the organization, what we can do something that we can explain the future problem, based on the current indicators to their organization and they aware with the problem (Transcript 2 page 4, line 6–12).

Dimension 7: Researchers as Compelled to Interact with Practice

The characteristic of this dimension is that the researchers do not think about their research contributing to management practice. They are forced to interact with practice and mainly they put in their research contribution as part of a requirement from their advisor and thesis. This dimension was captured, based on the first principle question, "What is your understanding of the relationship between research and practice?" For example:

> I: Do you think that [practitioners] would be interested in your research? Have you spoken to them?
> A: I haven't spoken to them... and I think they would be quite [interested]… it would be able to generate quite a bit of interest… So, I think there's this opportunity… to work (but are you doing something to push your research towards them) No I am not! (ok…) …(Transcript 1, Page 5, Line 3-10)
> A: …I've done one industry seminar…(Page 4, Line 23)

The above quotes indicate two things - reluctance to interact with practitioners, and yet involvement in an industry seminar. This inconsistency has been interpreted as compulsion of the interviewee by some unknown related party or stakeholder. Compulsion is an implicit theme interpreted in this transcript, and also observed by the interviewer.

Dimension 8: Researchers' Potential to contribute to Management Practices

The characteristic of this dimension is that the researchers believe that their research has potential to contribute to management practice. They believe if their research model can be confirmed through certain tests it can be applied to organisational and managerial outcomes. This dimension was captured based on the first principle question, "What is your understanding of the relationship between research and practice?" The following interaction between interviewee and students shows the category:

> I: And what about your, what you are researching in terms of how it's going to, we are going to look at how it might affect practice and the way people do things. You want to have a think about that?
> M1: I think in some ways that from the outset, I would not say that my research, not trying to shoot myself in the foot, does not have much to do with the practice of management. I see that the usefulness the validity of my type of research in practice is more at in terms of actually understanding people in the workplace…… (Transcript 3, page 1, line 14 – 20)

Dimension 9: Practitioners as Theory Builders

The characteristic of this dimension is that the researchers believe a manager is a theorist. They develop their own research model and add something that cannot be captured in research such as experience (gut feel) and risk. This category was captured based on our second principle question, "What is your experience of research contribution to management practices?" For example:

> I: Do you think that… that practitioners pay attention to research when they're out managing? When they're trying to win, or trying to use the resources efficiently, or all the things they're doing on a day to day basis?
> M2: I think that managers, or directors, are more theorists than the theorists themselves, the academics. Because, they're trying to guess, or to predict the situation, or to describe the situation, to describe, to explain about relationships between two factors, or cause and effect, and they try to modify, to, introducing new regulations, new procedures, routines, new strategy. They are actually making theories! Building theories first (yep) and then put it in a, what should I say, put it in their decisions. For that reason I think – there are two levels now, normatively, managers, or directors, should base their actions, or their managerial decisions, on research. I think they have to have these capabilities (Transcript 4, page 1, line 23 – 34).

Dimension 10: Researchers and Practitioners as Independent of, or Parallel to Each Other

The characteristic of this dimension is that at first the researchers believe that research should contribute to management practice. Later they believe that research and practice should be separate because of practitioner use of academic research for their own gain. They believe that academic research sometimes is used by the practitioner as part of their commercialisation program. This category was also captured based on our first principle question "What is your understanding of the relationship between research and practice?" For example:

I: When you think about the relationship between theory and practice, or the contribution of theory to managerial practice, what's your understanding or experience of that?
R: I would say that in my experience the two tend to be very separate and more separate than I think they should be. That the research community, if I can call it that, and the professional community, sorry the practitioner community, tend to keep each other apart and happily and purposively so. With some exceptions but in general I would say that the two are rather separate and indeed that that hinders a lot of progress (Transcript 5, page 1, line 1 – 9).

Appendix 3: Assignment of Dimensions to Particular Categories

Attributes	Dimensions	Category
D1 Understanding phenomenon D1 Research for the sake of research	D1 R = theory building (no impact on practice)	**Category 1 – theory focus**
D4 Staff training D4 Training D4 Student training	D4 R = teaching / training	
D7 Compulsion D7 Potential to practice D7 Can be applied to recruitment and managerial outcomes	D7 R -> P means compulsion	
D8 Potential to impact practice D8 Can be applied to recruitment and managerial outcomes	D8 R -> P means potential to impact practice	
D2 R=P D2 Value to practices D2 Tangible D2 Valuable D2 Measurable D2 Intervention programme	D2 R = process building (create process used in practice)	**Category 2 – Integrative (practice focus)**
D3 Practice as measurable D3 Research as deeper D3 Tool makers D3 R -> P D3 Research deeper than practice	D3 R, P = problem solving (R deeper, P shallower)	
D6 Eg AMJ to HBR D6 Toolmakers / toolbuilders D6 Simpler, efficient, effective D6 Communicate / connect P = R D6 Simplicity D6 Complexity (separation by language)	D6 R -> P means simplification	
D9 P = R D9 Implied that certain things not taken account of in research eg risk, gut / experience	D9 P = theory building	

D5 Change management perceptions D5 "Bridge the gap" D5 Application of research is a contribution to management = actually change D5 Change by challenging assumptions	D5 R = change agent / catalyst	**Category 3 – power / change focus**
D10 Connect (P/R) or separation is contextual D10 Research = personally incompatible with practice D10 Frustration by practice's resistance to change (futility) D10 Shift in attitude from R = P to R not connect to P	D10 R -> P : prefer independence, parallel action	

Table 3: Assignment of Dimensions to Particular Categories

Key: R = research, researcher
Key: P = practice, practitioner
Key: R = P : research should contribute to practice
Key: R -> P : how research contributes to practice

This version of the link between dimensions and categories assumes that dimensions are wholly contained within categories. In some cases this was unclear, but for simplicity, and due to the amount of the information provided here, it seems appropriate in this case. In a larger study, the issue of dimensions falling across multiple categories, would need to be investigated in more detail.

An alternate more complex graphical view (including dimensions crossing category boundaries) is provided on the next page. There was some debate during the analysis, as to whether dimensions cross category boundaries, which will be explored further in a fuller study, to pursue transgressive validity (i.e. the recognition of contradictions).

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