

EXECUTIVE PHDs AS A SOLUTION TO THE PERCEIVED RELEVANCE GAP BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE: A FRAMEWORK OF THEORY-PRACTICE LINKAGES FOR THE STUDY OF THE EXECUTIVE DOCTORAL SCHOLAR-PRACTITIONER

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ABSTRACT

Executive doctoral scholar-practitioners of Organization Development and Change (ODC) promise to be boundary-spanners who move between the worlds of academia and business in order to generate two outcomes—new theoretical knowledge and organizational results. Although there is agreement on the aims of this activity in terms of these dual outcomes (Anderson, Herriot & Hodgkinson 2001), there is a lack of clarity as to the means through which these results are achieved. Of particular interest is evidence for a unique form of activity that differentiates the executive doctoral scholar-practitioner from other scholars and practitioners, a form of activity that embodies a greater quality and/or quantity of theory-practice linkages. One purpose of this paper is to outline a framework of theory-practice linkages through which those results may be achieved. This framework consists of a matrix of linkages that covers the possible dimensions of theory-practice linkage across the context (people and place), content (input and output), and activity (task) of the executive doctoral scholar-practitioner of ODC. The other purpose of this paper is to discuss the face validity of this framework based on interviews with executive doctoral scholar-practitioners of ODC and three contrasting populations. The results show that the framework has sufficient validity to warrant application and further study¹.

INTRODUCTION

The executive doctoral scholar-practitioner of ODC is someone who completes a PhD in ODC while working full time as an executive of a profit or non-profit organization. In addition to a two- to four-year course of study, each doctoral student completes an original piece of research that makes a scholarly contribution to the knowledge of organizational development and/or change. This blend of practice and theory is held to enable the executive doctoral scholar-practitioner of ODC to move between the worlds of higher education and business in the pursuit of breakthrough management knowledge and more effective practice. The experiences of executive doctoral scholar-practitioners of ODC are a particularly rich terrain upon which to study theory-practice linkages. The solution promised by an executive doctoral scholar-practitioner of ODC is to be a 'boundary-spanner' who 'potentially closes the relevance gap from both ends' of science and business (Huff & Huff 2001, S50).

The investigation of this promise requires overcoming a major scholarly challenge: to define the phrase, executive doctoral scholar-practitioner of ODC. The problem is not with the

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phrase, executive doctoral. The words are fairly well defined by the institutions and programs of instruction that form the doctoral education. Although there are a variety of formats available (Hay & Bartunek 2002), they share common characteristics. They all enrol executives who continue to work full time while they pursue doctoral education. The educational programs consist of a rapid progression through the standard courses of full-time doctoral education followed by either a dissertation or an integrative paper that highlights the key learning from the focal projects of the coursework.

The problem is not a lack of fit between the objectives and the field of ODC: the objectives fall within the boundaries of the field of ODC. Although the field of ODC is continually developing and appropriating new techniques and theories that relate to the explanation and practice of change (French & Bell 2000), the core characteristics of it are fairly stable. From Lewin (French & Bell 2000; Cummings & Worley 1993) to Alderfer (1977) to current definition (Warrick 2002), the broad goals of ODC are to effect change and build knowledge of the change process.

The conundrum unfolds once the inquiry moves beyond the phrase, executive doctoral, and the field of ODC to consider the definition of a scholar-practitioner. Proponents of the scholar-practitioner have advocated the study of management and organizations (Huff & Huff 2001; Lawler et al. 1999; Rynes, Bartunek, & Daft 2001), or organizational change (Austin & Bartunek, in press), or social/educational change (Reason & Bradbury 2001b). Articles addressing the gap between theory and practice have focused on the practice of organizational change (Burke, Church & Waclawski 1993), management (Pfeffer 1987; Kilduff & Keleman 2001), graphology (Buckley, Ferris & Bernadin 1998), music composition (Tirrel 1988), literacy (Quigley 2000) and university teaching (Simendinger, Puia & Jasperson 2000). In addition to the phrase scholar-practitioner, this role has been called *prac-academic* (Aram & Salipante 2002), *practitioner-academics* (Simendinger, Puia, & Jasperson 2000), *practitioner-researcher* (Quigley 2000) and *reflective practitioner* (Schon 1983). The meaning that the phrase, scholar-practitioner, has does not inhere; it is imposed by those who use the phrase and, as such, takes on the contextual background of the user.

There is a need for a common framework with which to identify, assess and interpret the actions of scholar-practitioners. On the scholarly side, the hidden variability of the phrase makes study difficult because without some articulation and fixity to the semantic concepts of the term, it is impossible to construct testable hypotheses or even gain agreement on a qualitative question to explore. The hidden variability constrains the practitioner as well as the scholar, for without some articulation and fixity, it is impossible to separate that which has lasting substance from that which is a fad. The work of Abrahamson and Fairchild (1999), as well as Scarborough and Swan (2001) makes clear the ease with which management adopts new business contributions that later appear to be more perceived than real. The purpose of this paper is to advance a clear framework and to assess its preliminary face validity with interviews with those who make theory-practice linkages.

METHODS

A necessary first step in the investigation of the merits of executive PhDs is to bring them into conversation on theory practice linkages. The strategy behind the data collection was to have each respondent describe an experience that they regarded as the most successful at producing organizational results and then to probe the respondent on the various business and

knowledge antecedents, actions and results involved in that experience. The interview protocol was successful at providing each respondent multiple opportunities to reveal the practical and scholarly aspects of the project, as well as the activities that formed what would later be interpreted as theory-practice linkages. The approach of moving from experience to theory-practice linkage was critical at obtaining the actual dimensions of theory-practice linkage. Pretest interviews that moved from more abstract theory-practice questions to concrete experience questions resulted in the production of academically oriented descriptions that were not clearly grounded with experience.

The comments of the respondents were interpreted using a framework of theory-practice linkages. The robustness of the framework is enhanced with its triangulation across three distinct fields. The framework was developed by considering the executive doctoral scholar-practitioner from a vantage point that integrates the perspectives of ODC, management science and the study of science-within-society. The framework analyzes theory-practice linkages along the dimensions of person, place, input, output and task. These are in line with Spradley's directions for the observation of human events (Spradley 1980).

- Linkages at the level of person answer the question, who embodies a theory-practice linkage? Linkages of person are implied by the roles of scholar-practitioner and executive doctorate. Here the site of the conjunction of theory and practice is vested within the person (or persons) who is present within an organization.
- Linkages at the level of place answer the question, where can linkage be found? Linkages of place focus on the context rather than the people of that context. Here organizational forums where scholars and practitioners can meet serve to further the linkage. This concept is similar to that of *ba* used by Von Krogh, Ichijo and Nonaka (2000): '*Effective knowledge creation depends on an enabling context...a shared space that fosters emerging relationships*' (p. 7). Note that the concept of *ba* covers enabling contexts that are physical as well as virtual and mental. It goes beyond the physical embodiment to suggest a psychological outlook.
- Linkages of input answer the question, why do theory-practice linkages take place? Linkages of input focus on the motivation present before the action takes place. Here the analysis for theory-practice linkage looks for a shared agenda that targets both scholarly and practitioner needs.
- Linkages of output focus on the question, what are the results that characterize theory-practice linkage? Linkages of output are exactly that—the achievement of both scholarly and practitioner type results. There are other forms of output in addition to the dual achievements of scholarly quality and practical relevance.
- Linkages of task answer the question, how are theory-practice linkages enacted? Linkages of task focus the analysis on the actions that link input with output. For example, Action research involves a series of concrete activities that are characterized by the simultaneous production of knowledge and social results.

As mentioned, the framework is used to interpret the experiences of executive doctoral scholar-practitioners of ODC. In addition, interviews were completed with three contrasting populations: expert scholar-practitioners, corporate business researchers, and academics. A total of 17 interviews were completed, as indicated in Table 1.

Table 1. Respondent Interview Disposition

Respondents	Number of Interviews
Executive doctoral scholar-practitioners of ODC	7
Expert scholar-practitioners	2
Corporate business researchers	4
Academics	4
TOTAL	17

The inclusion of the three additional sample groups was crucial for analyzing the value and uniqueness of the executive doctoral scholar-practitioner of ODC; and, therefore, in assessing the validity of the framework (Cook & Campbell 1979; Kerlinger & Lee 2000). The contrast between the expert scholar-practitioners and the executive doctoral scholar-practitioners provides insight into the developmental progression of theory-linkage forms. Here validity is established with the presence of complementary theory-practice linkages between executive doctoral scholar-practitioners and expert scholar-practitioners. The contrast with academics differentiates the scholarly route of knowledge production; the contrast with business researchers differentiates knowledge production within the corporate environment. Here validity is established with the presence of divergent forms of theory-practice linkage between executive doctoral scholar-practitioners and either business researchers or academics. Forms of theory-practice linkage that outline the executive doctoral scholar-practitioner of ODC, but more so the expert scholar-practitioner, enhance the face validity of the framework. This is particularly true if business researchers and academics display different forms of theory-practice linkage.

THE FORMS OF THEORY-PRACTICE LINKAGE

The purpose of this section is to highlight the various forms of theory-practice linkage that are present within the three fields of ODC, management science, and science-within-society. Note that each field was examined separately in order to identify forms of theory-practice linkages. Forms of linkage common to multiple fields were included as one entry; however, forms of linkages unique to a field were also included. These two features are critical in order to reach a plausible synthesis across the three fields, a synthesis that accentuates the commonalities without trimming the unique qualities of each field-specific linkage. Additional forms of linkage were added based on personal experience and the findings of the interviews. The framework is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Framework of Theory-Practice Linkages

Linkage Dimension	Theory-Practice Linkage Forms
Context	
People (Who)	Executive Doctorates, Scholar-Practitioners, Ph.D.s Employed By Business
Place (Where)	Dialogic Forums, Trans-Organizational Structures, Boundary-Spanning Departments
Content	
Input (Why)	Organizationally Hot Theoretical Issues, Profound Problems of Human Existence/Organizations
Output (What)	Induced Theory, Enacted Theory, Actionable Knowledge, Meta-Theories, Emancipatory Vision
Activity	
Tasks (How)	Idea Translation, Action Research, Participative Inquiry, Modes 1.5, 2 and 3 Knowledge Production

Linkages of people

There are three forms of theory-practice linkage on the dimension of people. Implicit within the topic of study is the *executive doctorate* and the de facto linkage that this title implies. Executive doctoral programs in both ODC (i.e. Benedictine University) and management (i.e. FENIX) highlight this sole individual who is capable of linking theory and practice. There is also the *scholar-practitioner* who may form the paragon of ‘people’ theory-practice linkage regardless of the form of doctoral education and practice they encounter. Often found within ODC, these individuals are known for their scholarly publications and successful work with or within organizations on the achievement of business results. In this study two of such expert scholar-practitioners are interviewed; they were selected because of their mastery at securing both forms of achievement. A third form of people linkage is also evidenced the literature (Gibbons, Limoges, Nowotny, Schwartzman, Scott & Trow 1994)—people who have attained a PhD before working within business. These *PhDs employed by business* possess the academic skills to complete scholarly research and the employment context through which to form other linkages.

Linkage of place

There are three forms of theory-practice linkage on the dimension of place. The management literature in particular discusses two such forms of place linkage. Van de Ven (2002) advances the merits of a common *dialogue forum* at the Academy of Management in which scholars and practitioners can co-produce relevant management knowledge. Although there is opportunity for other forms of linkage besides place with *dialogue forums*, the emphasis is on the establishment of a physical and social space in which scholars and practitioners can meet. *Trans-organizational structures* are evident at USC and its Center of Effective Organizations (CEO). (For a description of CEO, see Cummings, Mohrman, Mohrman, Jr. & Ledford, Jr. 1999). Here there is a formal organization run parallel to universities and business that

conducts practical and theoretical research within those businesses. Although other forms of linkage most certainly flow from this linkage, the emphasis is on the formal arrangement that represents the integration of the scholarly with practical aims and resources.

This research found that certain departments within an organization also serve as linkages between theory and practice. For example, the business research department within most corporations exists to provide the revenue producing departments (operations, marketing) with proprietary knowledge and business models (informal theory) with which to enhance corporate performance and profitability. These sorts of departments are labelled *boundary-spanning departments* to acknowledge the contribution of the boundary-spanning literature to this concept (Tushman & Scanlan 1981a; 1981b).

Linkage of input

There are two forms of theory-practice linkage on the dimension of input. One of the forms of 'input' linkage comes out of the work of Adler, Shani & Styhre (in press) to describe the objectives that drive collaborative management research. This form is called *organizationally hot theoretical issues* (Adler & Shani 2001) to capture the integration of meaningful theoretical topics with organizationally important business needs. Found within the literature of ODC, specifically the range of interventions called Participative Inquiry (Reason & Bradbury 2001a; 2001b), is a focus on solving *profound problems of human existence/organizations*. Here the input is on 'new questions about emergence and enduring consequences, of practice and practicing, about plural ways of knowing, of relational practice, and about significance' (2001a, p. 12). The goal is to develop new knowledge, frames of reference and theory through which better and more just forms of living emerge. Theory and practice are linked as multiple ways of knowing and acting that are open to all for the benefit of all both individually and collectively.

Note that what is absent from this framework is reference to the traditional academic input of theoretical gaps or business input of organizational need or profit. Although these forms of input are evidenced within the literature and interviews, they cannot be considered to be forms of theory-practice linkage. Theoretical gaps fall solely within the academic camp; organizational need/profit falls within the practice camp.

Linkages of output

There are five forms of theory-practice linkage on the dimension of output. Both management science and ODC stress the value of *enacted theory* (Pfeffer 1987; Pfeffer & Fong 2002; Rynes, Bartunek & Daft 2001; Porras & Robertson 1987; Burke et al. 1993). *Enacted theory* involved securing outcomes that are clearly linked to a particular theory or based on a theoretical perspective. Note that this is a goal of management education—to improve the practice of managers by equipping them with a greater academic knowledge of management and related topics. As Starkey and Madan write, 'the ultimate goal of the Executive PhD programme—with its focus upon the management and organization of business and knowledge development—is to provide an education for tomorrow's leaders of industry' (2001, p. S23). The same is said for those who are responsibility for completed organizational change projects (Burke, Church & Waclawski 1983).

Although *enacted theory* involves both theory and practice—it is the theory that is enacted—the linkage is in favour of enactment or practice. When the linkage of theory-practice output favours theory, the form of linkage is called *induced theory*. As expressed within the field of

ODC, induced theory exists when the practice of change leads to new theoretical insights expressed in published articles (Austin & Bartunek, in press). Although the actual organizational experiences and practice are integral to *induced theory*, the value of this form of linkage lies in its ability to extend theoretical insights with new concepts.

Actionable knowledge becomes a goal of those who produce knowledge for the consumption of workers and practicing managers. Unlike the *enacted theory* and *induced theory*, there is an even balance of theory and practice. '*Actionable scientific knowledge* refers to the knowledge creation process that meets the criteria and needs of both the scientific community and the organization' (Adler, Shani & Styhre, in press). There is a value placed on new knowledge that leads to new avenues of practice, but only to the extent that these insights lead directly to practice. Note that the linkage between theory and practice must be made in order for the knowledge to be actionable. This linkage is one that is created—the knowledge is made actionable; action does not inhere within the knowledge.

The theory-practice linkage of *meta-theories* involves achieving new insight that enables the actors within an organization to reconceptualize their intervention plans while at the same time leading the academic to new theoretical advancements. The correlate of *meta-theories* for social communities is *emancipatory visions* (Habermas 1983). *Emancipatory vision* is the result of change programs that achieve a simultaneous reorganization of social resources (to free the participants within the social system) and of social beliefs, values and norms (to explain, legitimate and sustain the reorganization of resources). *Meta-theories* and *emancipatory vision* are different from actionable knowledge in that the linkage of knowledge and action is automatic and instantaneous in the former but not the latter. They propel the organization and its members forward towards the achievement of a new goal.

Linkages of task

There are six forms of theory-practice linkage on the dimension of task. The linkages of *Mode 2 Knowledge Production* and *Idea Translation* do involve both theory and practice; however, in each of these linkages, only one is dominant. *Mode 2 Knowledge Production* draws down upon academic skills, yet favours the abilities to get results that find prominence within organizations. Huff's summary of *Mode 2 Knowledge Production* differentiates its characteristics from *Mode 1 Knowledge Production*, the traditional form of academic research.

In contrast to the production of science by scientists, *Mode 2* is characterized as the production of knowledge from application. Its practitioners often have disciplinary training from *Mode 1* institutions, but their work tends to be transdisciplinary. Whereas *Mode 1* is hierarchical, *Mode 2* is heterarchical. It is group based rather than focused on the work of individuals. Whereas *Mode 1* producers of knowledge worry about certification, *Mode 2* knowledge is validated in use. Response time is critical. *Mode 2* knowledge tends to be transitory. (Huff 2000, p. 289)

Idea translation moves ideas back and forth between the worlds of academics and practitioners; however, it is the ideas that get moved not the actions, and the movement is within the media that favours academics—written publications and workshops. Austin and Bartunek (in press) advocate for three types of idea translation that serve to bridge the academic and practitioner communities. One model of translation is *same author translation* in which the same content appears in two different articles, each geared towards a different

audience; one academic and the other practitioner. Another model is *different author translation* in which the content of another author is translated for a different audience by the second author. The last model of translation is *common language translation* in which 'implementation and change process theories are presented side by side within the same article to show their commonalities and differences'. The desired output of idea translation is journal articles with both managerial relevance and empirical validity.

Action Research is a technique for 'both solving a problem and generating new knowledge' (Coghlan & Brannick 2001, p. 15) that has been around for at least 50 years. Regardless of the variety or source of the approach, *Action Research* is characterized by three common themes (Bruce & Wyman 1998, pp. 13–14):

1. Action Research is change oriented: It is problem focused and aims at improving some existing condition or practice.
2. It is organic. It is a reiterative research process that consists of systematic, iterative steps.
3. It is collaborative. It is research conducted as a joint cooperative effort among the participants.

Mode 1.5 Knowledge Production was proposed as a method of inquiry that retains characteristics of *Mode 1 Knowledge Production*, yet also blends in aspects of *Mode 2 Knowledge Production*. Huff describes *Mode 1.5* with the following passage.

The issues of importance to *Mode 1.5* typically will rise from practice and will be defined in conversation with those in practice, but other insights should be solicited and integrated. The relevant data will come primarily, but not entirely, from practice. Academic skills will be useful in developing definitions, comparing data across organizational settings, and suggesting generalizable frameworks for further sensemaking. (p. 292)

The linkages of *Action Research* and *Mode 1.5 Knowledge Production* achieve a balance of theoretical and practical tasks. These tasks involve equal moments of action and knowledge construction. However, these moments may be neither simultaneous nor integrated. Action and knowledge construction may alternate with each other or occur on parallel tracks.

The activities of *Participative Inquiry* require the simultaneous creation of new action and insight as a result of a common task. Similarly, *Mode 3 Knowledge Production* engages this concrescence of action and knowledge construction for the betterment of the world. Huff and Huff (2001) complete their analysis of *Mode 3 Knowledge Production* by contrasting it with *Mode 1* and *Mode 2*. They summarize *Mode 3 Knowledge Production* with the following paragraph:

The 'trigger' for *Mode 3* appears to be appreciation and critique of the human condition, as it has been, is, and might become. The individuals carrying out these conversations are in communities that tend to be more permanent than those sheltering *Mode 2*, or even *Mode 1*. They are anchored in birthplace, residence and relationship as opposed to employment. The purpose of *Mode 3*

Knowledge Production, generally stated, is to assure survival and promote the common good, at various levels of social aggregation. (p. S53)

These theory-practice linkages may be ideally suited for the production of *emancipatory visions*.

DIFFERENTIAL PATTERNS OF THEORY-PRACTICE LINKAGE

Table 3 displays the dominant theory-practice linkages for each sample of the four populations interviewed. Dominant refers to the forms of linkage that characterized more of the respondents from that sample. Note that given the qualitative nature of this work, these comparisons are useful to suggest rather than establish divergent and convergent validity. For example, only two of the forms of theory-practice linkage (*induced theory* and *Mode 3 Knowledge Production*) were not able to be matched with respondent comments. Every other form was able to be matched with a comment of a respondent at least once. With a larger sample these non- and single occurrences may turn out to have significantly higher frequency and distribution relative to the other forms. Nonetheless, this analysis is useful in capturing some of the salient commonalities and differences between the different populations.

For example, executive doctoral scholar-practitioners of ODC tend to display two forms of theory-practice linkage but only at the level of output. (They do by definition embody a people linkage as well.) Executive doctorates produce enacted theory and actionable knowledge. These two forms of output are also produced by the expert scholar-practitioners, but not by business researchers nor academics interviewed. Expert scholar-practitioners display more forms of theory-practice linkage and these forms appear across the levels of context, content and activity. Business researchers also display linkage at the level of activity and context, but not at the level of content. The academics displayed the fewest number of theory-practice linkages. Given their successful record of publications and other academic achievements, the absence of theory-practice linkages reflects more the use of practices in which theory and practice are not linked. This group did alternate between modes of practice (usually consultation) and modes of theory construction (research, writing and publication) but rarely accomplished both at the same time as a coordinated project.

Table 3. Most Dominant Theory-Practice Linkages of Different Populations

Category	Executive Doctorates	Expert Practitioners	Scholar- Business Researchers	Academics
Context				
People (Who)	Executive Doctorates	Ph.D.s Employed By Business, Practitioners	Scholar- By	Ph.D.s Employed By Business
Place (Where)				Boundary-Spanning Departments
Content				
Input (Why)				
Output (What)	Enacted Theory, Actionable Knowledge	Enacted Theory, Knowledge, Meta-Theories	Actionable	
Activity				
Tasks (How)		Modes 1.5 Knowledge Production	Knowledge	Modes 2 Knowledge Production

CONCLUSION

The primary conclusion from the above analysis is that the framework has sufficient convergent and divergent validity to warrant further study and application. Expert scholar-practitioners display more forms of linkage. Executive doctoral scholar-practitioners are more like expert scholar-practitioners than business researchers and academics. Business researchers and academics display different patterns of linkage than either expert scholar-practitioners or executive doctoral scholar-practitioners of ODC.

The findings are preliminary. The research has its limits and thus cannot be considered conclusive. The research deals with a small sample of respondents, selected by convenience, who are within the network of my personal contacts. The executive doctoral students are from one program within the United States. Only verbal descriptions of the successful events are collected, and these are from the one perspective of the respondent. It is entirely possible that research with a more representative sample, or even a different qualitative sample, may produce different results.

However, these limits do not pose a fatal challenge to the work. Given the lack of substantial prior research on this topic, no other path is possible: these methods match the current state of the literature and its content. They are more than sufficient for the tasks at hand. The framework is a promising first step in providing a common set of terminology and interpretive lens through which to advance scientific and practical inquiry into executive doctoral scholar-practitioners of ODC. Clearly further study is needed.

And further study is warranted. The relevance of the differential patterns of theory-practice linkage demonstrates the contribution this work makes to the literature. First, the dominance of theory-practice linkages with expert scholar-practitioners indicates that they have a unique approach to achieving the dual outcomes of organizational and theoretical results. In this sense they may be role models for executive doctoral scholar-practitioners. Second, the occurrence of fewer linkages with the executive doctoral scholar-practitioners of ODC suggests that possessing such a degree may not be sufficient to realize the full potential they have for theory-practice linkage. Executive doctoral programs may wish to consider including more linkages across the different levels in order to make it more likely for theory-practice linkages to be enacted and continued post graduation.

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