

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES? IMPACTING: SOCIETY, IDEOLOGICAL ENDEAVOURS, OR GOOGLE SCHOLAR?

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ABSTRACT

The following reflections on practice were written to highlight the growing issue of the research-practice gap in academia and to stimulate debate. With respect to applied research, it would seem the social sciences, including business schools, perform poorly in producing research which is relevant and useful to practitioners, policy makers and society in general. Research is expensive and time consuming, and in many countries, taxpayers are the major funders of university research. With such outlay and investment, it is not unreasonable to expect research undertaken in our universities, especially applied research in the social sciences, to have impact on society and improve the world we live in. It should be noted that some journal publishers, especially in the business and management field, are focusing greater editorial attention in an effort to highlight the growing gap between academia and practice. Therefore, it is hoped this short reflection will help generate further debate and continue the efforts to highlight this important issue.

Keywords: Research-Practice Gap, Social Impact, Practical Usefulness, Real-World Relevance, Social Sciences

INTRODUCTION

I recently co-authored two articles discussing the impact of applied academic research on the world we live in. The first, “*Should academic research be relevant and useful to practitioners? The contrasting difference between three applied disciplines*” (Fraser et al., 2020), was a gentle lead-in to the more critical second, “*Abundant publications but minuscule impact: The irrelevance of academic accounting research on practice and the profession*” (Fraser & Sheehy, 2020). The premise for the articles is that our complex world offers us a myriad of problems to overcome and that our universities harbour the world’s brightest minds, therefore providing the ideal incubator to enhance our understanding and provide solutions. Challenging this view is the growing criticism that academic research, especially from our social sciences and business schools, is having very limited impact on practitioners, policy makers and society in general. Therefore, the research undertaken in the above articles provides an indication of the gap between the research being published by academia and its usefulness to practitioners. The articles also add empirical support to the increasing amount of anecdotal criticism of a growing gap.

Recent Studies Further Explained

The purpose of the two studies highlighted above was to empirically investigate the research-practice gap in business schools and help better understand the size of the gap. To provide an objective assessment of the problem, the study compares practitioner’s use of academic research from three applied professions, accounting, engineering and medicine. The reason for choosing accounting was two-fold: firstly, in many countries, accountants need to obtain a license to practice and be a member of an overarching professional national body, which is similar to engineering and medical practitioners. Secondly, from the large amount of

literature reviewed from the applied sciences, accounting was the discipline receiving some of the strongest criticism, and the criticism had become more pronounced over the last decade. Many stakeholders, both within and outside of academia, were questioning the relevance and value of research published in accounting journals.

The results of the above studies found that for accounting there were major differences in the sourcing of information, and statistically significant differences from the other two applied fields with respect to the utilisation and the need for academic material. The findings lead to the conclusion that academic accounting researchers appear to be significantly divorced from the real-world profession of accounting. If we were to take a pragmatic view of the purpose of academic accounting research, then the current situation could leave accounting researchers vulnerable to adverse decisions with respect to the allocation of future government research funding. This point is becoming a reality in a number of countries as governments implement performance-based research funding systems (Fraser et al., 2018), with research funding being linked to its impact on society (Fraser et al., 2020).

Delusional View of Research and Practice

The following briefly highlights the motivation behind my interest in the research-practice gap. I spent 25 years in practice, both in private and government organisations before becoming an academic. I entered academia with the mindset that applied research, in the main, would be closely aligned with social and practical needs. It doesn't take one long to realise that if one wants to publish in the 'top' journals, then theoretical grounding overrides practical links, and methodological rigour displaces practical relevance. Interestingly, top academic journals are ranked by 'impact', but sadly not the social and practical impact being highlighted in this reflection paper.

Focus on Paradigm Wars

An unhealthy development for accounting is the current 'paradigm wars' being waged by some academic accounting researchers (Fraser, 2014; Klaes, 2012; Malmi, 2010). There is a clear divide between the two established paradigms, positivist (quantitative) and interpretivist (qualitative), within accounting research. This is certainly the case with respect to publishing accounting research in 'so-called' top-ranked accounting journals in the United States, with quantitative analysis of large data-bases being favoured over other research methodologies (Bryman, 2006). Clearly there are problematic issues surrounding the use of a dominant 'single knowledge source' to explain a dynamic phenomenon such as accounting. Unfortunately, these 'paradigm wars' seem to be based more on self-advancement and producing academic elites than enhancing our knowledge and understanding of accounting (Fraser, 2014; Merchant, 2010).

Gap-Spotting Mentality

An issue hampering efforts to close the research-practice gap is the 'gap-spotting mentality' of academia. PhDs and academic research are predominately focused on 'finding a gap in the literature', where research becomes aimed at an increasingly narrow and purely academic audience. Many PhD candidates experienced first-hand the issue of the 'gap-spotting mentality' (Brooks et al., 2019; Fraser et al., 2015). When starting my PhD, an industry-based scholarship, my highly experienced supervisor stressed to me the need for my PhD to be based on a 'gap' in the literature. Having spent 25 years in practice I struggled with this concept knowing that the real-world offered endless issues and problems (gaps) to be solved. While I believe that literature is a very important aspect of research and the PhD process, I am somewhat surprised that the 'gaps' for applied PhDs are not generated by real-world problems in practice and/or society. When such real-world gaps are identified, the academic literature plays an important role in enhancing our understanding of the problem, while at the same time,

integrating and expanding the underpinning theories and principles to achieving practical outcomes (Fraser et al., 2018).

Ideological Endeavours

Another issue of concern is that over the last few decades it would seem there has been an attempt by some areas of the social sciences to reduce efforts on seeking truth and knowledge, and instead enter into a relentless idealistic march to discredit Western civilisation. Anyone who made the effort to understand ‘privilege’ in Asia, Africa or the Middle East would be very cautious about allocating blame for many of the world’s problems on, ‘White, Western, 50 year-old males’. But Peggy McIntosh (McIntosh, 1988; 1992) inspired many from our social science faculties who mysteriously came to the same conclusion. Continuing on the theme of idealistic fallacy, many in our social science and political faculties are still devoting their unwavering endeavours to educate future generations on the utopian dreams of socialism. This is surprising given that half the world’s countries have tried to implement Karl Marx’s theories in some form, with all suffering a devastating decline in human advancement, human freedom and human rights. Another contemporary topic of research in the social sciences is the injustice of Western colonisation, especially with a focus on British and white, but little effort is devoted to comparing the impact of the colonisation by Arab/Islam on the Middle East and Northern Africa.

CONCLUSIONS

In closing, I want to state that I don’t believe that all applied research conducted in our universities should have direct impact and implications for practice and society. There are many cases where the research issue or topic needs time to develop and mature from the theoretical and conceptual stage. But from the research I have undertaken, the evidence is showing that there is a large and growing disconnect between the research being undertaken in our social science schools and the practical real world we live in.

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