Invited Target Paper for the European Journal of Marketing:

21st January 2016

Theorizing with Managers:

How to Achieve Both Academic Rigor and Practical Relevance?

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Abstract

Purpose. There are heightened concerns that the theory-praxis gap is widening, despite decades of academic literature addressing the issue. We propose that one viable solution to this challenge is involving practitioners in research processes as active, reflective and empowered participants. Most extant discussions addressing the inclusion of managers as partners in theorizing restrain themselves to an 'if' question, arguing whether or not it is possible to create sufficiently rigorous knowledge in collaboration with practitioners. This leaves the 'how' question unanswered, i.e., how should such gap-bridging research be conducted in practice. Thus, the aim of this paper is to investigate how academic researchers in management and marketing can theorize with managers in order to generate results that are both academically rigorous and managerially relevant.

Design/methodology/approach. Based on a literature review of collaborative theorizing processes, we develop a conceptual framework highlighting the main research design decisions when theorizing with managers. The use of the framework is illustrated with four research program examples.

Findings. Most accounts of theorizing with managers use – explicitly or implicitly – abduction as the main mode of inference. In addition to this philosophical commonality, our literature review identified twelve themes that should be considered when designing collaborative research processes. The four illustrative examples indicate that theorizing with managers is an effective way of producing and socializing both academically sound and

managerially relevant knowledge. On the other hand, collaborative theorizing processes are time-consuming and studies using abductive reasoning may be more challenging to publish in top-tier journals.

Originality/value. This paper makes two contributions. First, we go beyond the extensive academic literature which provides a plethora of explanations and ideas for potential remedies for bridging the theory-praxis gap by offering a detailed description how one particular solution, theorizing with managers, unfolds in practice. Second, we ground collaborative theorizing processes in the philosophy of science and put abduction forward as a common nominator for such studies.

Keywords: theory**,** theorizing, collaborative theorizing, theory-praxis gap, methodology, abductive reasoning

1. Introduction

Ideally, academic research in management and marketing should benefit theoretical and empirical domains alike. This leads Stokes (1997) and Corley and Gioia (2011) to suggest that there are two important considerations when evaluating academic research: the originality or the fundamental nature of the contribution, and the usefulness of the contribution in practice. According to Corley and Gioia (2011), the originality of the contribution relates to the extent that the research offers new theoretical linkages that have rich potential for the domain of study. When examining the usefulness of the contribution, they distinguish between academic (scientific) contributions and contributions directed towards practical usefulness. Stokes (1997), on the other hand, considers usefulness as the extent to which the academic contribution is able to benefit the practice. Both Stokes (1997) and Corley and Gioia (2011) put forward two-by-two matrices to examine contribution, making a case to aspire towards the "golden quadrant", which offers both fundamentally new theoretical understanding and high levels of practical usefulness. Stokes (1997) labels this golden quadrant as use-inspired basic research, and uses Louis Pasteur as an example of a scholar creating knowledge that is both theoretically fundamental and practically highly useful.

Unfortunately it seems that academic research in management and marketing is moving further and further away from the golden quadrant (Storbacka, 2014). Corley and Gioia's (2011) assessment of the articles published in the Academy of Management Review in the last two decades shows that most conceptual articles offer only incremental scientific insight and that the theorizing processes neglect practical usefulness. With management and marketing practice progressing at an unprecedented pace, academia struggles to keep up and

it has been suggested by both academics (Reibstein, Day & Wind, 2009; Starkey & Madan, 2001; Jaworski, 2011) and practitioners (Kristof, 2014) that the theory-praxis gap is widening. This widening of the theory-praxis gap is poignant, as it is taking place despite decades of academic literature addressing this issue. For example Fendt, Kaminska-Labbě and Sachs (2008) sample 60 articles from management literature on the topic and identify 19 explanations why the theory-praxis divide exists and 17 alternative proposals that academics have provided to remedy this issue.

In their meta-synthesis of the theory-praxis divide literature, Fendt et al. (2008) conclude there is the need for academic research to return to pragmatism that focuses not only at producing relevant management knowledge but also socializing it. They highlight the importance of including practitioners in the research process as active, reflective and empowered participants. However, most discussions addressing the inclusion of managers as partners in theorizing restrain themselves to an 'if' question, arguing whether or not it is possible to create sufficiently rigorous knowledge in collaboration with practitioners. This leaves the 'how' question unanswered, i.e., how should such gap-bridging research be conducted in practice (cf., Hodgkinson & Rousseau, 2009; Schiele & Krummaker, 2011).

Thus, the aim of this paper is to investigate *how academic researchers can theorize with managers in order to bridge the theory practice divide* and thus generate results that are both academically rigorous and managerially relevant. We approach this research question through a comprehensive literature review on collaborative theorizing processes, specifically focusing on research streams that involved managers as active participants in these processes. In particular, we revisited naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), cooperative inquiry (Reason, 1988), collaborative research (Shani et al. 2008; Pasmore et al. 2008), action

research (Dickens & Watkins, 1999; Reason & Bradbury, 2006), clinical research (Normann, 1977; Schein 1987, 1995), engaged scholarship (Van de Ven and Johnson, 2006), interactive research (Gummesson, 2001), and consortium benchmarking (Schiele and Krummaker, 2011). From these literatures we sought descriptions on the particularities of theorizing with managers: who participates in the process, how the process unfolds, and what are the outcomes of collaborative theorizing. After this, we develop a conceptual framework describing how academic researchers can design theorizing processes that involve practitioners as emancipated participants. We illustrate the use of the framework with an overview of four research programs that have successfully bridged the theory-praxis gap.

The contribution of the paper comes from elaborating on a research approach to theorizing that increases both academic knowledge and managerial relevance. In particular the contribution comes from directly addressing and outlining how theorizing should happen. Thus we go beyond the extensive academic literature which provides a plethora of explanations and ideas for potential remedies but offers little detailed guidance about how things should happen.

The paper proceeds as follows. In the next section we explore abduction as a recurring theme in accounts of collaborative theorizing. It is followed by an investigation of the processes of theorizing with managers in the light of extant literature that is synthesized into a conceptual framework. This leads to a section that illustrates the use of the proposed framework with four example research programs. After this, we discuss the benefits and challenges associated with theorizing with managers. The final section provides outlines our contribution to bridging the theory-praxis gap and suggests avenues for future research.

2. Abduction as the mode of inference when theorizing with managers

Interestingly, our literature review suggests most accounts of collaborative theorizing depict processes in which conceptual development and empirical observation are intertwined – suggesting de facto abduction. We hypothesize that there are two reasons behind the prevalence of abductive inquiry when theorizing with managers: the pragmatic roots of collaborative theorizing and the information needs of managers.

First, most researchers that theorize with managers or propose collaborative theorizing as a way of bridging the theory-praxis gap implicitly embrace the principles of pragmatism. Some, such as Fendt et al. (2008), go further and explicitly suggest a wider re-return to pragmatism. Pragmatism (Dewey, 1930; James, 1907; Peirce, 1905, 1997) is a philosophical tradition that gives emphasis to the link between action and truth, positing that the definitive test of knowledge is the readiness to act on it. The founder of pragmatism, Charles Sanders Peirce (1905, 1997), researched abduction extensively and portrayed it as central to pragmatism. Therefore, abduction seems to be philosophically congruent mode of inference when theorizing with managers.

The second rationale for abduction stems from the fact that abduction is able to generate results that are potentially valuable for managers. While deductive arguments offer a seductive allure in that they are logically valid (i.e. if the premises are true then the conclusion has to be true), they do not offer new insights. In other words, the information contained in the conclusion is already present in the premises – and hence is relatively

uninteresting for practitioners. Alternatively, induction offers the opportunity to infer new insights and generalizations. However, such inferences are problematic in their justification in that they themselves rely upon inference and probabilistic reasoning, i.e., calculating the probability of the conclusion in relation to the premises (Psillos, 2007). This, in turn, makes application of inductive insights risky for managers, especially if the new insights are generated in a markedly different context compared to the one where the managers in question operate. Abduction, or "inference to the best explanation" (Psillos 2007), offers the opportunity to justify such generalizations in that it takes into account the quality of competing explanatory considerations – that which best explains the phenomena is considered the best inference or generalization. Thus, when it comes to different modes of inference or reasoning processes, abductive inquiry can generate insights that are both novel and usable from the managerial perspective.

However, our review of the philosophy of science and management literature indicates that the concept of abductive reasoning has been used in a number of ways[1]. Thus, as it is the objective of this paper to illuminate how academic researchers can theorize with managers, we will next seek to describe these differences in a way that it helps researchers to choose their own approach knowingly.

[1] As Aliseda (2006) points out, the word 'abduction' can be used to refer to the end-product of abductive reasoning process (i.e., 'abductive explanation') or to the activity itself. In this paper we focus on abduction as an activity.

Most depictions of abduction emphasize the role of creativity in theorizing. Building on Peirce's (1905, 1997) view that discovery rests primarily on abductive reasoning, van Maanen et al. (2007) define abduction as a foundation for inquiry, beginning with an unmet expectation and working then backwards to create a plausible theory to render meaning to the surprise. . According to van Maanen et al. (2007), Peirce did not consider abduction as a 'logic' per se but rather as "… a path of critical reasoning in which conjectures follow surprises" (pg. 1149). In a similar vein, Dubois and Gadde (2002) posit that abduction is fruitful if the researcher aims to discover new things, such as other variables and relationships. Therefore abduction is commonly thought of as more suitable for theory development (i.e., the context of discovery) rather than theory confirmation (i.e., the context of justification).

Additionally, the tension between empirical and conceptual domains seems to be one of the key drivers behind creative theorizing, something that abduction knowingly promotes. Van Maanen et al. (2007) state that in order to service theory, abduction assigns primacy to the empirical world and that the interplay between observational and conceptual work lies at the heart of abduction. Dubois and Gadde (2002) emphasize 'systematic combining' of empirical observations and theory in order to expand the understanding of both. However, acknowledging the importance empirical observations does not limit abduction to arcane case descriptions. According to Dubois and Gadde (2002), conceptual development lies at the heart of abduction, and the successive refinement of concepts constitutes both an input and an output of an abductive study.

However, the exact scope of abduction divides opinions. Magnani (2001) explicitly acknowledges that the term abduction is used to denote different parts of the theorizing

process. He explains that there are two main epistemological meanings of the word abduction: generation of plausible hypotheses (also the definition that he himself uses) or inference to the best explanation. According to Magnani (2001), the latter one refers to the complete abduction-deduction-induction cycle. In addition to these two basic definitions, he also puts forward a concept of creative abduction, which is responsible for the discovery of both the reason and its consequences (such as the discovery of a new disease and its symptoms). Also Aliseda (2006) discusses the varying scope of abduction. She, however, limits abduction to cover hypothesis generation and selection. According to Aliseda (2006) some authors consider these as two separate steps in abductive reasoning processes whereas others consider abduction as a single process by which the most plausible hypotheses is constructed.

Possibly due to the differences in defining the scope of abduction, also views on how abduction relates to deduction and induction vary considerably. Most authors seem to concur with Dubois and Gadde (2002) that abduction should not merely be considered as a synonym for a mixture of deductive and inductive approaches. Harman (1965) takes the broadest view and considers abduction as the basic form of non-deductive inference. Most scholars, however, seem implicitly aligned with van Maanen et al. (2007) proposition that "deduction and induction follow and complement abduction as logics more suitable for the always imperfect testing of plausible theories" (pg. 1149).

To summarize, a characteristic of abductive reasoning is that it allows for the interplay between the conceptual and empirical domains. In addition to this commonly accepted characteristic, it is possible to detect and develop the following definitions for abductive reasoning from the literature:

1. *The entire process of creative and critical theorizing* that gives primacy to the empirical world, or

2. *Part of the theorizing process*, responsible for
    a. identifying formerly unknown phenomenon and the related plausible hypotheses, or
    b. generating plausible hypotheses / explanations for a known phenomenon, or
    c. identifying the most plausible hypothesis / explanation for a known phenomenon.

Given these various uses of 'abduction', we echo Järvensivu and Törnroos' (2010: 102) call for increased specificity when describing abductive research processes: "It is not, however, enough to say that a research process is abductive. Rather, we need to specify in what way it is abductive. We suggest that throughout the research process, or in its different phases, we can identify differences in abduction." Labelling theorizing with managers simply as abductive without explicating how and when abduction has been used is the easy way out – and given the existing concerns about the lack of rigor in collaborative theorizing (cf., Kieser & Leiner, 2009) sloppy descriptions of theorizing processes merely amplify these trepidations.

3. Choices in designing a research process involving managers

In addition to identifying abduction as a common nominator for collaborative theorizing processes, the current literature highlights various choices that researchers have to make when designing research processes involving managers as active and empowered

participants. These questions can be categorized into matters related to participants, research design, collaboration process, and the outputs of the research process.

3.1. Participants

When it comes to discussing the participants in collaborative theorizing processes, very few studies elaborate on this beyond the fact that theorizing with managers involves both academics and managers. Most studies, however, emphasize that theorizing with managers is a challenging task. Here we highlight several aspects of this challenge.

3.1.1 Conflict and convergence in points of view

Van de Ven and Johnson (2006) highlight that theorizing with managers is often characterized by conflict and interpersonal tensions that arise from bringing people with different views and approaches together. Some scholars such as Kieser and Leiner (2009) go as far as to suggest that these different perspectives are so fundamentally dissimilar that truly collaborative theorizing with managers should be avoided to ensure sufficient rigor and generalizability of results.

Even though Kieser and Leiner (2009) are openly skeptical about the possibilities of collaborative theorizing to deliver rigorous outputs, they provide us with some interesting insights in facilitating fruitful exchange between management researchers and practitioners in general. In particular, they highlight the role of ‘bilingual and bi-competent facilitators’; academics, who are able navigate the worlds of praxis and academia. In particular, the

bilingual abilities of academics involved in theorizing with managers seem to be of utmost importance. As Kieser and Leiner (2009, pg. 528) point out, "literal descriptions in one context are metaphorical descriptions in the other. Only those who are intimate with the respective other communication systems manage, on the basis of their knowledge, to produce metaphors that inspire the other system's communication partners." In their later research, Kieser and Leiner (2012) underscore that academics have to be able to unpack their knowledge and abstract concepts for managers – and that the social set-up as well as the research design should be such that managers feel comfortable in asking 'stupid' clarifying questions and that there is sufficient time for overcoming these communication barriers. In a similar vein, clinical research (Normann, 1977) emphasizes the importance of language in making knowledge actionable for the practitioners (see also Cunliffe, 2001), whereas Schiele and Krummaker (2011) highlight 'meta-discourses' between academics and practitioners as a key knowledge creation mechanism during consortium benchmarking.

3.1.2 Reflectivity and reflexivity on practice as learning

Schön's (1983) notion of 'reflective practitioners', on the other hand, informs us of the kind of practitioners that are likely to participate in collective theorizing processes. Drawing on the pragmatist John Dewey and his interest in integrating theory and practice, Schön (1983) separated reflection into two categories: reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. Reflection-in-action takes place in present time, when a practitioner seeks to attend the situation at hand, and is what Archer (2007) would term reflectivity. Reflection-on-action, in contrast, takes place retrospectively when a practitioner analyses his past actions and their consequences, and is what Archer (2007) would term reflexivity, or theory-practice consistancy. Cunliffe (2004) argues that managers need to learn critical reflexivity, and

argues that "critically reflexive practitioners […] question the ways in which they act and develop knowledge about their actions. This means highlighting ideologies and tacit assumptions - exploring how our own actions, conversational practices, and ways of making sense create our sense of reality" (p.414). Reflective and reflexive practice is central to many theories related to higher-level learning such as transformative (Mezirow, 1991), expansive (Engeström & Sannino 1987) or double-loop (Argyris & Schön, 1978) learning. Building on this, Pasmore et al. (2008) stress that there cannot be any collaborative theorizing unless all participants in this process share a fundamental interest in learning. Such learning requires not only reflection, but also reflexivity, where theory-practice consistency is examined, questioned, and ultimately understood.

3.1.3 The one vs. the many

Interestingly, the notion of organizational boundaries among the participating practitioners, or academics for that matter, is very seldom discussed in the extant literature. Should theorizing with managers be contained to one commercial organization and one academic institution at a time? Many methodologies related to collaborative theorizing (e.g., action research, clinical research, cooperative inquiry) are built around a notion of emancipating practitioners to improve their respective organization in cooperation with academic researchers. Thus, these research approaches implicitly assume that the academic researchers are theorizing with practitioners originating from one organization, i.e., the one that is being improved with this particular intervention.

In the context of management research, which often deals with commercially sensitive questions and information, limiting the number of participating organizations to one makes

practical sense. However, conceptually the limitation of "one academic institution and one commercial organization per research project" is less than robust. On the contrary, Van de Ven and Johnson (2006) base their concept of engaged scholarship on intellectual arbitrage: exploiting, rather than avoiding, the differences in the kinds of knowledge that academics and managers can bring to the table. The principles of arbitrage posit that the amount of new knowledge created is positively related to the diversity of participants' backgrounds, suggesting that it is beneficial to engage individuals from various academic institutions and commercial organizations in collective theorizing processes. Schiele's and Krummaker's (2011) method called 'consortium benchmarking' is an example of such collective theorizing involving multiple commercial organizations at the same time. Consortium benchmarking brings together practitioners from multiple organizations in two respects: it gathers together a number of companies interested in a particular topic, and then this consortium group visit several best practice companies during the benchmarking process (Schiele & Krummaker, 2011). Despite the information benefits of involving multiple companies in a consortium benchmarking project, competitive sensitivities can sometimes pose practical problems: "If any of the best practices firms are in competition with any of the firms joining the research consortium, they may not agree on a visit" (Schiele & Krummaker, 2011, p. 1144).

3.2. Research design

The process of undertaking research with managers poses various questions related to research design. There seems to be various ways of defining the research questions, but more fundamental methodological choices appear to gravitate towards abduction and methodological pluralism.

3.2.1 Finding suitable research questions

The extant literature provides various perspectives on how to define research questions when theorizing with managers, starting from philosophical discussions about the subject-object distinction (c.f., Cunliffe, 2011) and ending up in pragmatic concerns. Involving managers in the identification and framing of research questions is not a straightforward task. Traditionally, only academics are considered as fully-fledged participants in developing scientific research questions. There are concerns that practitioners are ill-equipped to participate in research question formulation as they lack suitable theoretical understanding – and some activist practitioners could also convince academics to pursue research questions that are deliberately aimed to benefit their subjective motives (Kieser & Leiner, 2012).

Some authors approach the research question dilemma by discussing what kinds of research questions are interesting to practitioners. Caswill and Shove (2000, pg. 221) suggest that practitioners are "more attracted to new ideas and concepts than empirical materials" while Van de Ven and Johnson (2006) suggest research questions that address big, wicked problems or problems that are grounded in empirical reality. Other researchers suggest that research questions can, at least in some instances, be framed and defined collaboratively by both academics and practitioners (Pasmore et al., 2008; Schiele & Krummaker, 2011).

Interestingly, even though academics admit that they have insufficient understanding on what practitioners know and where they gain their knowledge (Kondrat, 1992), there is an almost complete lack of studies suggesting that practitioners are able to identify valuable research questions. However, there is no logical reason why managers – especially as many present-day managers have bachelors, masters and even doctoral degrees and thus have received a basic training in scientific inquiry – could not articulate research questions that are researchable, theoretically interesting and managerially relevant.

3.2.2. From single case studies to methodological pluralism

Even though many action research and cooperative inquiry applications focus on qualitative single case studies, theorizing with managers is not limited to any particular method – and nor does is favor qualitative methods above the quantitative. On the contrary, we posit that that theorizing with managers leads to methodological pluralism.

There are various generic arguments for the use of multiple methods in research design. Mingers (2014) argues that the real world is complex and multidimensional and thus unlikely to be adequately served by any particular research method. He also posits that as research is not an event but a process of discovery with discrete phases and differing activities that will be predominant at any one time, multiple methods are a necessity in most research designs. In a similar vein, Matthyssens and Vandenbempt (2003) and Järvensivu and Törnroos (2010) argue that methodological pluralism is needed in order to get the right balance between theory building and theory testing. Mingers' (2014) third argument is that multiple methods in a research design allows for, and encourages, triangulation and helps to generate more interesting and stimulating results. The same sentiment is echoed by Dubois and Gibbert (2010) who suggest that studies using different approaches may inspire each other theoretically, empirically and even methodologically. Finally, Dubois and Gibbert (2010) argue that methodological pluralism is needed because different methodological camps may disagree on how to categorize different approaches at any given point in time, let alone over time.

In addition to these more general rationales for methodological pluralism, the use of abduction puts forward a case for embracing multiple methods. For example, van Maanen et

al. (2007) suggest abduction leads to the so-called principle of opposites (see also Bailyn 1977). The principle of opposites calls for quantitative analysis of qualitative data and appreciating the qualitative nature of quantitative data (by e.g., examining the extremes or outliers instead of merely eliminating them). Additionally, abductive research needs methodological pluralism to illuminate the invisible. In abduction we are looking for creative explanations that account both for the observed phenomenon and for the absence of things that we had expected to happen but did not. Methodological pluralism helps us examine both what is present and what might be absent – and why – because it does not limit itself to one particular form of observation or measurement.

3.2.3. Collaboration as the data vs. external data sources

The scope of inquiry can vary considerably as well when theorizing with managers. If interpreted narrowly, cooperative inquiry (Heron, 1977; Reason, 1988) involves a group of practitioners and academics who seek to understand the system (team, organization) and improve its operations with the collective knowledge at their disposal. Therefore the theorizing process does not include steps that require separate information gathering or analysis, and the potentially resulting new knowledge is generated during the practitioner-academic interactions. Most action research applications seem to follow a similar logic: the intervention itself is considered as data and little data collection takes place above and beyond that. However, the scope of inquiry in collaborative theorizing can be also wider. Consortium benchmarking, for example, involves collecting and analyzing data also from sources external to the participating consortium firms (Schiele & Krummaker, 2011).

3.3. Collaboration process

The implementation of the research design also requires special attention when theorizing with managers. For example, conscious decisions have to be made about possible interventions. Additionally, the respective balance of power and pattern of involvement between academic and practitioner should be discussed, not least when it comes to the financial support for the research.

3.3.1 The power to intervene and to theorize

The collaborative theorizing process with managers can take on multiple forms. Many collaborative research approaches, such as action research or clinical research, involve interventions that are aimed at transforming the participating organization. However, as Pasmore et al. (2008) point out, collaborative research is not limited to methods that include interventions.

The ideal power balance between academics and practitioners in theorizing is a topic that divides opinions. Certain approaches such as naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and cooperative inquiry (Reason, 1988) advocate strongly an ideal of equal partnership of academics and practitioners in theorizing. Other scholars, on the other hand, at least imply theorizing processes that are collaborative but leave academics in control of the theorizing. For example, Gummesson's (2001) interactive research emphasizes a notion of 'audiences' and how encounters with audiences help academics in their continuous theorizing process.

3.3.2 Investing time and money

Finally, two aspects about theorizing processes with managers are left with little discussion in the literature. First, even though the power balance discussion leads us to consider the managers' involvement in relation to academics (i.e., are managers as involved in the theorizing process as the academics or are they assigned a smaller and/or more passive role), the potential differences in the involvement between managers are left unaddressed, implicitly assuming that all managers assume the same role for the collaborative theorizing process. However, academics acknowledge that different members in an academic research team can hold differing roles – and that individual researchers' roles can vary from one research project to another. We hypothesize that this holds true also for managers involved in collaborative theorizing processes.

Second, very few accounts of collaborative theorizing methods openly discuss whether or not the participating practitioners also participate in financing the collaborative theorizing (one of the exceptions by Schiele & Krummaker, 2011). However, it is quite plausible that practitioners are willing to pay for their involvement in such collaborative theorizing processes, especially if the theorizing process is aimed at improving the capabilities and performance of their organization – as many action research applications are.

3.4. Output

By definition, theorizing with managers is expected to generate knowledge that is relevant for both practitioners and academics alike. However, questions arise as to how we come to agree what is considered relevant and how the resulting knowledge will be used.

3.4.1 What type of knowledge do we want?

Traditionally, it is often assumed that practitioners are more interested in prescriptive knowledge that they can immediately apply in their organizations: “Managers may desire quick fixes to pressing organizational problems while researchers care more about generalizable solutions to widespread issues” (Pasmore et al., 2008, p. 12). In a similar vein, Van de Ven and Johnson (2006) propose that theorizing with managers should produce managerially relevant knowledge, that can take four broad forms, each having the potential to support managers in a given problematic situation: description (what and how), explanation (why), prediction (setting and achieving expectation) and control (effective intervention).

The nature of resulting knowledge (context-dependent, normative) is also one of the main arguments employed by the critics of collaborative theorizing: if theorizing with managers cannot produce generalizable results, then academics should steer clear from such endeavors (cf., Kieser & Leiner, 2009, 2012). However, making a distinction between general theories, middle-range theories and theories in use (cf., Merton, 1968; Hunt, 1983) provides an alternative perspective to the knowledge generated through collaborative theorizing. Brodie, Saren & Pels (2011) propose that general theories are broad conceptions which are framed at the highest conceptual level within a disciplinary domain. Middle-range theories, on the other hand, consider more limited scope of phenomena and are more specific in nature, in that they seek to understand how more general theoretical principles operate in more specific contexts and circumstances. However, middle-range theories are not limited to a particular empirical context. On the contrary, they can be used for partial explanations of a range of different phenomena (Hedström & Ylikoski, 2010).

Building on Merton (1968), Hedström and Ylikoski (2010, p. 61) propose that a middle-range theory “does not bore the reader by attempting to describe the causal process in all its detail;

instead it seeks to highlight the heart of the story by isolating a few explanatory factors that explain important but delimited aspects of the outcomes to be explained." Therefore it can be concluded that middle-range theories could be desirable outputs from collective theorizing processes as these theories have the capacity to satisfy the information needs of both parties: accessible and actionable enough for managers as well as broad and rigorous enough for the academic audience.

3.4.2 How do we want to use the knowledge generated?

Regarding managers' use of the knowledge generated by collective theorizing, we draw upon science utilization literature and distinguish between instrumental, conceptual and symbolic use of knowledge (e.g. Beyer and Trice, 1982; Landry, Amara & Lamari, 2001; Pelz, 1978). Instrumental use refers to instances where theoretical accounts are considered as solutions to specific managerial problems and they are acted upon directly. Conceptual use involves using theory to influence thinking and actions indirectly, often through general enlightenment. Symbolic use alludes to situations, in which theories are used as symbols or rhetoric to legitimize certain positions and action. As noted above, both advocates and critics of collaborative theorizing seem to assume that managers use the resulting knowledge in an instrumental way. Interestingly, studies by Cornelissen and Lock (2005) and Åge (2014) suggest that managers are, in fact, at least as interested in using theoretical knowledge conceptually and symbolically as well.

The above literature review shows there is no single best practice but a multitude of ways to engage practitioners in collaborative theorizing. Figure 1 synthesizes the main findings of our coverage of the literature, and highlights the decisions that researchers have to make when designing collaborative theorizing processes[2].

Figure 1. How to theorize with managers: overview of the main choices

[2] The framework depicted in Figure 1 is developed using a morphological method (Ritchey, 2006, 2012), which is usually applied to multidimensional and non-quantifiable problems. The morphological method first identifies and defines the most important dimensions relevant to the situation or problem at hand ('Decision areas' in Figure 1). Each dimension is then divided into possible and relevant categories ('Choice alternatives' in Figure 1). Together the dimensions and the categories create a 'morphological field', which is used to identify viable solutions to the issue under study by combining suitable categories ('Choice alternatives' in Figure 1) into various 'morphotypes'. Figure 2 illustrates four morphotypes for collaborative theorizing, that is, what choices were made in the four illustrative research programs discussed in section 4.

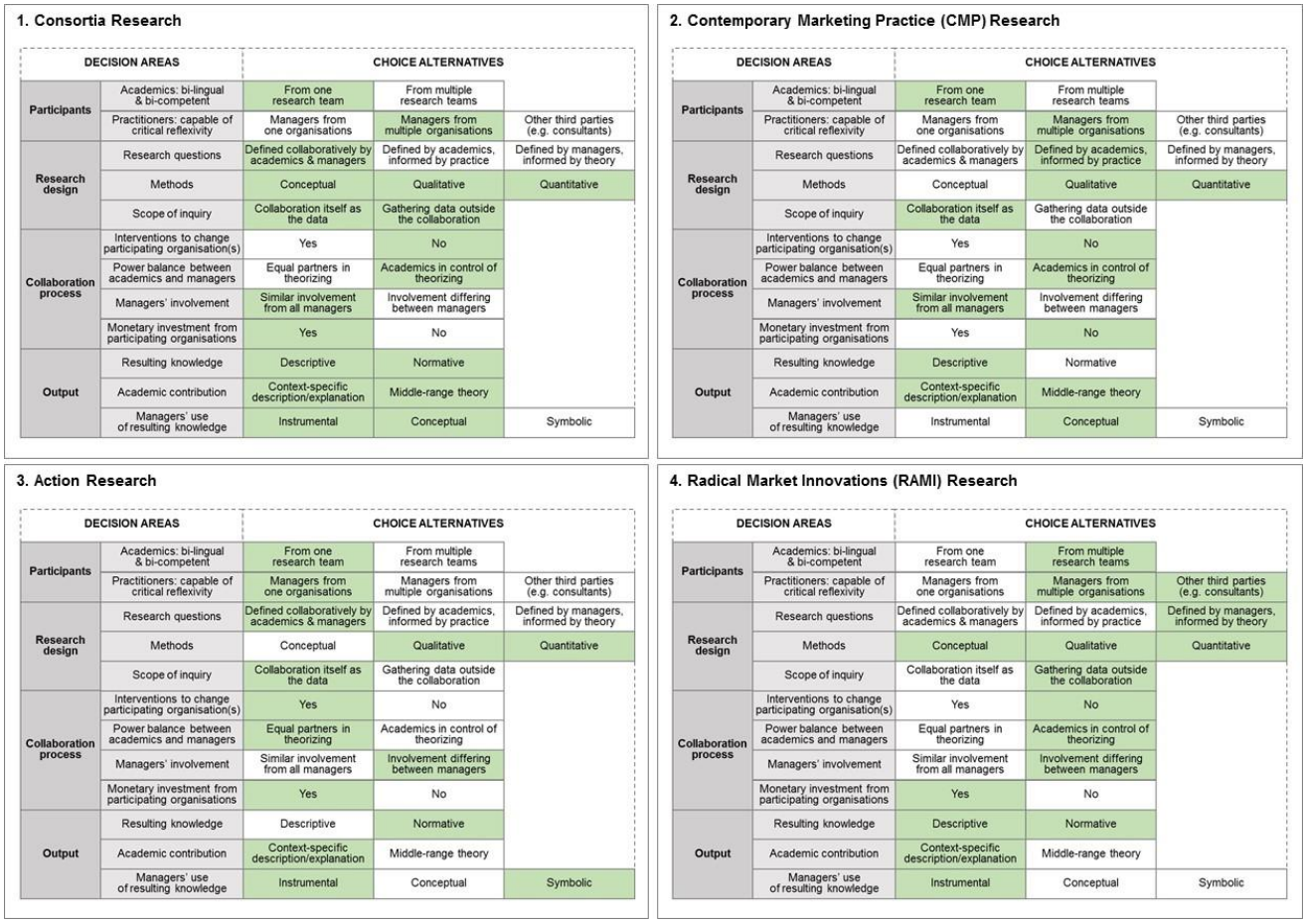
DECISION AREAS		CHOICE ALTERNATIVES		
Participants	Academics: bi-lingual & bi-competent	From one research team	From multiple research teams	
	Practitioners: capable of critical reflexivity	Managers from one organisations	Managers from multiple organisations	Other third parties (e.g. consultants)
Research design	Research questions	Defined collaboratively by academics & managers	Defined by academics, informed by practice	Defined by managers, informed by theory
	Methods	Conceptual	Qualitative	Quantitative
	Scope of inquiry	Collaboration itself as the data	Gathering data outside the collaboration	
Collaboration process	Interventions to change participating organisation(s)	Yes	No	
	Power balance between academics and managers	Equal partners in theorizing	Academics in control of theorizing	
	Managers' involvement	Similar involvement from all managers	Involvement differing between managers	
	Monetary investment from participating organisations	Yes	No	
Output	Resulting knowledge	Descriptive	Normative	
	Academic contribution	Context-specific description/explanation	Middle-range theory	
	Managers' use of resulting knowledge	Instrumental	Conceptual	Symbolic

4. Illustrations: Four collaborative theorizing processes

In order to illustrate how theorizing with managers unfolds in practice, we will next review four research programs that the authors have directed. The first research program (Consortia Research) involves a series of 15 consortium research projects conducted between 1996 and 2014, focusing on a range of marketing and management topics, where each research project had its own theme. The second is a ten-year research program (Contemporary Marketing Practice, CMP Research) was undertaken in over 15 countries to examine changes in marketing practices of firms. The third program is an eight-month long action research project (Action Research) carried out to improve the customer management practices of a beverage company. The fourth research program (Radical Market Innovations, RAMI, Research) was conducted in 2009-2010 to address the innovation practices and opportunities

among Finnish forest cluster companies. We use the framework outlined in Figure 1 to structure our discussion. Figure 2 summarizes this discussion and juxtaposes how collaborative theorizing was designed and executed in these four instances.

Figure 2. Summary of the four illustrations



1. Consortia Research

DECISION AREAS		CHOICE ALTERNATIVES		
Participants	Academics: bi-lingual & bi-competent	From one research team	From multiple research teams	
	Practitioners: capable of critical reflexivity	Managers from one organisations	Managers from multiple organisations	Other third parties (e.g. consultants)
Research design	Research questions	Defined collaboratively by academics & managers	Defined by academics, informed by practice	Defined by managers, informed by theory
	Methods	Conceptual	Qualitative	Quantitative
	Scope of inquiry	Collaboration itself as the data	Gathering data outside the collaboration	
Collaboration process	Interventions to change participating organisation(s)	Yes	No	
	Power balance between academics and managers	Equal partners in theorizing	Academics in control of theorizing	
	Managers' involvement	Similar involvement from all managers	Involvement differing between managers	
	Monetary investment from participating organisations	Yes	No	
Output	Resulting knowledge	Descriptive	Normative	
	Academic contribution	Context-specific description/explanation	Middle-range theory	
	Managers' use of resulting knowledge	Instrumental	Conceptual	Symbolic

2. Contemporary Marketing Practice (CMP) Research

DECISION AREAS		CHOICE ALTERNATIVES		
Participants	Academics: bi-lingual & bi-competent	From one research team	From multiple research teams	
	Practitioners: capable of critical reflexivity	Managers from one organisations	Managers from multiple organisations	Other third parties (e.g. consultants)
Research design	Research questions	Defined collaboratively by academics & managers	Defined by academics, informed by practice	Defined by managers, informed by theory
	Methods	Conceptual	Qualitative	Quantitative
	Scope of inquiry	Collaboration itself as the data	Gathering data outside the collaboration	
Collaboration process	Interventions to change participating organisation(s)	Yes	No	
	Power balance between academics and managers	Equal partners in theorizing	Academics in control of theorizing	
	Managers' involvement	Similar involvement from all managers	Involvement differing between managers	
	Monetary investment from participating organisations	Yes	No	
Output	Resulting knowledge	Descriptive	Normative	
	Academic contribution	Context-specific description/explanation	Middle-range theory	
	Managers' use of resulting knowledge	Instrumental	Conceptual	Symbolic

3. Action Research

DECISION AREAS		CHOICE ALTERNATIVES		
Participants	Academics: bi-lingual & bi-competent	From one research team	From multiple research teams	
	Practitioners: capable of critical reflexivity	Managers from one organisations	Managers from multiple organisations	Other third parties (e.g. consultants)
Research design	Research questions	Defined collaboratively by academics & managers	Defined by academics, informed by practice	Defined by managers, informed by theory
	Methods	Conceptual	Qualitative	Quantitative
	Scope of inquiry	Collaboration itself as the data	Gathering data outside the collaboration	
Collaboration process	Interventions to change participating organisation(s)	Yes	No	
	Power balance between academics and managers	Equal partners in theorizing	Academics in control of theorizing	
	Managers' involvement	Similar involvement from all managers	Involvement differing between managers	
	Monetary investment from participating organisations	Yes	No	
Output	Resulting knowledge	Descriptive	Normative	
	Academic contribution	Context-specific description/explanation	Middle-range theory	
	Managers' use of resulting knowledge	Instrumental	Conceptual	Symbolic

4. Radical Market Innovations (RAMI) Research

DECISION AREAS		CHOICE ALTERNATIVES		
Participants	Academics: bi-lingual & bi-competent	From one research team	From multiple research teams	
	Practitioners: capable of critical reflexivity	Managers from one organisations	Managers from multiple organisations	Other third parties (e.g. consultants)
Research design	Research questions	Defined collaboratively by academics & managers	Defined by academics, informed by practice	Defined by managers, informed by theory
	Methods	Conceptual	Qualitative	Quantitative
	Scope of inquiry	Collaboration itself as the data	Gathering data outside the collaboration	
Collaboration process	Interventions to change participating organisation(s)	Yes	No	
	Power balance between academics and managers	Equal partners in theorizing	Academics in control of theorizing	
	Managers' involvement	Similar involvement from all managers	Involvement differing between managers	
	Monetary investment from participating organisations	Yes	No	
Output	Resulting knowledge	Descriptive	Normative	
	Academic contribution	Context-specific description/explanation	Middle-range theory	
	Managers' use of resulting knowledge	Instrumental	Conceptual	Symbolic

4.1. Variations of abduction

As implied by Järvensivu and Törnroos (2010), even though all four research programs could be labelled as 'abductive', there were certain differences how abductive reasoning was used in practice. In three research programs (Consortia, CMP, Action Research) the conceptual frameworks were developed simultaneously and interactively with empirical observations.

Additionally, two research programs (Consortia, Action Research) exemplify an interesting variation of abductive inquiry: even though traditionally abduction is understood as an inference to possible explanations or the most likely explanation, the main conceptual outputs of Consortia and Action Research can be considered as the most plausible managerial solutions related to the research questions – even though they might not provide complete explanations of the observed phenomena. As discussed, the RAMI research program consisted of six separate academic research projects. Some of these individual research projects could be categorized as abductive whereas others were more inductive in nature. However, the entire process was highly abductive: the academic deliverables acted as inputs for four large-scale innovation workshops where the objective was to brainstorm new growth opportunities for the Finnish forest cluster. Each of these innovation workshops involved 16-24 managers and 1-6 academics, and these workshops can be seen as platforms for creative abduction (Magnani, 2001).

4.2 Participants

When comparing the academic participants in these four research programs, it appears that at least three separate strategies have been used to ensure that the academics involved in the collaborative theorizing process are 'bilingual and bi-competent facilitators' (Kieser & Leiner, 2009). In Consortia and Action research, the researchers had a background in management consulting, enabling them to navigate between the worlds of academia and praxis. In CMP research, the majority of the researchers had extensive experience in teaching executive MBAs and other post-experience executive students. The RAMI research program brought together six separate academic research teams, and the ability of these researchers to act as bilingual and bi-competent facilitators varied considerably. Therefore the facilitator

role was ‘outsourced’ to two external consultants, who both had relevant PhD degrees and a track record in academic research.

Interestingly, only one of the illustrative examples (Action Research) was limited to theorizing with managers from a single organization; all other research programs involved managers from multiple organizations. A typical Consortia research project consisted of 8-10 firms, each represented by 3-4 managers. The CMP research program was conducted during various post-graduate executive education programs, and the class sizes in these courses were typically between 20 and 40 students, each student representing a different private or public organization. The RAMI program involved a total of 112 senior managers from 10 major firms within the Finnish forest cluster.

The critical reflexivity of the participating managers (Schön, 1983; Cunliffe, 2004) was handled through a process of self-selection. The researchers in the CMP program had no way of influencing who attended their classes, but they deliberately limited the research to post-experience degree programs alone. This ensured that the participating managers were in mid-career expert or manager positions, with expressed interest in higher-level learning. The other three examples (Consortia, Action Research, RAMI) involved lengthy recruitment processes. During this recruitment process the research idea was presented to various firms, and only those who had sufficient interest in the theme were willing to commit resources to a long and time-consuming collaborative theorizing process. After this the key decision-makers (often CEOs or other members of the executive team) were responsible for nominating the participating managers for their respective firms. There is anecdotal evidence that this selection was often profoundly influenced by the managers’ ability to critically reflect on their own work and the practices of their entire organization.

4.3 Research design

It is possible to detect all three hypothesized ways of defining research questions among the four illustrative research programs. In Consortia and Action Research, the research questions were formulated collaboratively between the academic researchers and the managers. In Action Research managers and academics were equal partners in formulating the research questions, whereas academics had slightly more influence in Consortia Research: managers had the opportunity to comment and refine the research questions drafted by the academic researchers. The CMP research program followed the more traditional academic convention in which the academic research team was responsible for defining the research questions, motivated by the observed mismatch between theory and empirical reality. The RAMI research program was the most radical in its approach to formulating research questions: the participating firms defined the overall research project themes – and only after this external facilitators started recruiting suitable academic research teams to execute research about the selected themes. Once the academic research teams were contracted, these teams had some freedom to fine-tune and sharpen their respective research questions. However, the final research questions were subject to approval from the participating firms.

When analyzing the methods being used, all four examples demonstrated methodological pluralism. Consortia Research relied more on qualitative methods, even though quantitative methods were present as well in almost all research projects. The CMP and Action Research, on the other hand, put equal emphasis on qualitative and quantitative methods. The six research projects involved in RAMI program utilized a wide array of various methods, ranging from bibliometric studies and historical analyses to ethnographic studies, systems analyses and quantitative content analysis with self-organizing maps.

In terms of the scope of inquiry, the collaboration with the managers generated sufficient new data for theorizing in Action Research and CMP research programs, as suggested by the traditions of cooperative inquiry (Heron, 1977; Reason, 1988). However, in Consortia and RAMI research programs the researchers actively collected data also outside the collaboration with the managers. The external data sources were in a complementary role in the Consortia research program (e.g., secondary data case studies to complement the main frameworks co-created with the managers), whereas external data sources were the primary data sources for the majority of the six research projects involved in the RAMI program.

4.4. Collaboration process

When assessing the four illustrative examples from the collaboration process perspective, it is interesting to conclude that only Action Research included a clear intervention to improve the health of the particular organization. Confirming Pasmore et al. (2008) notion of collaborative theorizing without interventions, none of the other research programs (Consortia, CMP, RAMI) had a built-in intervention component that took place during the collaborative theorizing process. This does not, however, imply that the results of the remaining research programs were not used as inputs as interventions – these interventions merely took place without the presence of the academic researchers. For example, the firms involved in the RAMI program held their own workshops – after the collaborative theorizing process was concluded – to decide which of the co-created growth ideas they would transfer to their own R&D pipelines.

From a power perspective, we can observe a similar pattern emerging: only Action Research adhered to the ideals of naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and cooperative inquiry

(Reason, 1988) of equal partnership of academics and practitioners in theorizing, whereas in all the other research programs academics were firmly in control of the theorizing. This observation leads us to hypothesize whether research processes that involve collaborative interventions to improve the health of the participating organization(s) require a more even balance of power between the academics and practitioners.

Managers' involvement in the collaborative theorizing varied as well between the four research program illustrations. In Consortia and CMP research programs all participating managers had similar roles in the theorizing process. For example, in Consortia research managers were mainly responsible for providing access to primary data within their organizations, commenting and critiquing the co-created frameworks, and testing these frameworks in practice. Even though some managers were more active than the others, all manager participants had this same basic role throughout the collaborative theorizing process. In the Action Research and RAMI programs, on the other hand, different managers had markedly different roles in the collaborative theorizing process. For example, in the RAMI program some managers were responsible for providing access to primary data for the academic researchers, others for theorizing with the researcher teams while the academic research projects were on-going, whereas a third group of managers was responsible for overseeing and guiding the entire RAMI program, and a fourth group of managers participated in the innovation workshops.

In terms of monetary investment, each firm participating in the three research programs (Consortia, Action Research, RAMI) paid a participation fee to cover the part of the research costs, whereas the participating managers in the CMP program were not asked to invest anything more in addition to their normal tuition fees.

4.5. Output

The comparison of the four example research programs illustrates that the knowledge resulting from theorizing with managers can take on multiple forms. In Consortia research, the main immediate outputs were managerial thinking tools (similar to more famous frameworks such as the 'BCG growth-market share matrix', 'product lifecycle', or '4P framework'). Due to this emphasis, the results of the Consortia research can be classified as pre-dominantly normative, even though there were some descriptive outputs as well. Additionally, some of the Consortia outputs come very close to the idea of middle-range concepts as defined by Hunt (1983) and Brodie et al. (2011), an example being the process-based framework to manage the co-creation of value (documented in Payne, Storbacka & Frow, 2008). The results of the Consortia research have resulted to 12 academic articles (published, e.g., in *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, *Journal of Business Research* and *Industrial Marketing Management*) and nine managerial books that have been cited in Google Scholar over 3,800 times. However, some of the outputs were clearly narrower, context-specific descriptions or explanations (e.g. case studies, self-assessment toolkits).

The main outputs from In CMP research program were a conceptual framework categorizing different marketing practices and a quantitative assessment of their use in practice. These outputs can be classified as more descriptive in nature, even though the categorization of marketing practices may also provide some normative clues to managers. Similar to Consortia research, CMP research program's academic contributions can be described as a combination of context-specific descriptions and wider middle-range theories. In the decade up to 2008 this led to the publication of over fifty academic articles and three book chapters about different aspects of marketing practice (Brodie, Coviello and Winklhofer 2008). Of

particular importance was the article published in the *Journal of Marketing* (Coviello et al. 2002), which has received over 500 citations in Google Scholar to date.

The main outputs of the Action Research program were three-fold: an analysis of the firm's customer base and its current customer management practices, a conceptual model describing how the customer base could be segmented and managed, and an implementation plan to change the firm's customer management practices. These outputs are pre-dominantly normative, especially as the descriptive analysis was considered as a necessary preface for the normative conceptual model and implementation recommendations. Academically, the outputs of the Action Research program remain at the level of context-specific descriptions. However, the results of this particular Action Research program have later been analyzed together with two other action research projects, and this cross-case analysis has yielded contributions that could be labelled as a middle-range theory (documented in Nenonen & Storbacka, 2015).

The RAMI research program, on the other hand, created two types of deliverables: academic research reports from the six research teams and documented growth ideas for the Finnish forest cluster from the innovation workshops (2,323 short individual ideas, developed into 126 detailed idea descriptions). The academic research reports contained both descriptive and normative outputs, whereas the growth ideas from the innovation workshops were by definition normative in nature. The academic contribution from the six research teams was pre-dominantly context-specific, most likely due to the strong influence of the practitioners in determining the research questions. Despite this potential challenge, some of the research teams have published their respective research results in academic journals such as *Consumption, Markets & Culture*, *Journal of Forest Economics* and *Journal of*

Macromarketing. Additionally, similar to Action Research program, the authors have been involved in conducting a meta-analysis of all the results of the RAMI program, and this has resulted in conceptual developments that have some similarities with middle-range theories (documented in Nenonen, Möller & Storbacka, forthcoming).

Finally, it is possible to detect considerable variations in managers' use of the resulting knowledge. In three research programs (Consortia, Action Research, RAMI), managers used the resulting knowledge instrumentally – as predicted by e.g. Pasmore et al. (2008), Van de Ven & Johnson (2006) and Kieser and Leiner (2009, 2012). However, in Consortia research, this instrumental use of knowledge was complemented by conceptual use of knowledge – which was also the main form of knowledge use observed in the CMP research program. Additionally, in the Action Research program the managers complemented the instrumental use of knowledge with symbolic use. It is entirely possible that managers used the resulting knowledge symbolically in the other three research programs as well, but due to the lack of prolonged contact with the participating managers we were not able to make any definite conclusions on this.

5. Socializing relevant knowledge – and tensions with academic conventions

As suggested by Fendt et al. (2008), involving managers in the research process as active, reflective and empowered participants seems to be a viable way of not only generating relevant management knowledge, but also socializing it. Bardone and Secchi (2009) assert that one of the most overlooked variable in understanding human cognition is the social side. Rather than viewing the representation of knowledge as a kind of abstract mental structure, they maintain that "… cognitive performances can be viewed as the result of smart interplay

between humans and the environment" (Bardone and Secchi, 2009: 191) This environment may include the actions and influences of other humans, as well as material objects such as written plans or the illustrative drawings of theoretical frameworks.

The review of the four illustrative examples showcases how such socialization of knowledge – though smart interplay between humans and their environment – can take various forms when theorizing with managers. Various participating managers emphasized how the concepts and frameworks resulting from a collaborative theorizing process are more accessible and understandable to them compared to the theories can be read from various literary sources without similar academia-practitioner interaction.

> *"[The consortium] was a useful tool for [Company X] to help expand and reframe our thinking […]. We were able to apply the tools we gained out of [the consortium] to real life issues and problems and come up with fresh viewpoints that challenged our existing paradigms."*
> *(Participant in the Consortia research program)*
>
> *"I have more clarity on tools to use to assist future business development."*
> *(Participant in the Consortia research program)*

In addition to being an active participant in creating and using relatively generic management frameworks, the creation of context-specific knowledge representations was often mentioned as a considerable benefit of collaborative theorizing.

> *"Although demanding, the [innovation workshops] were truly a success. Besides creating an innovative atmosphere that induced a change in*

> *mindset, the workshop also generated several ideas, in total over 2,300. Of course, some ideas were impossible to implement and some had already been implemented, but there were some real pearls among the ideas as well." (Participant in the RAMI research program)*
>
> *"We handed over to the research team a wealth of data of over 4,200 customers. Out of that data and a number of weekly meetings came a suggestion for customer segmentation." (Participant in the Action Research program)*

Finally, effective socialization of knowledge seems to be connected to the speed and ease of turning managerial insights into managerial action.

> *"Good support for some business ideas already being promoted." (Participant in the RAMI research program)*
>
> *"[The consortium theme] was a key topic in our most recent global leadership conference and is still a popular topic of conversation." (Participant in the Consortia research program)*
>
> *"We roll out the development work continuously as it proceeds." (Participant in the Action Research program)*
>
> *"We believe that the development work has gained us a few years' lead to our competition." (Participant in the Action Research program)*

However, it appears that socializing new knowledge comes at a cost, as theorizing with managers seems to be at odds with certain academic conventions. First of all, recruiting

managers to participate in collaborative theorizing processes is often a lengthy process: in Consortia research the average recruitment period was 9 months for each individual research project, the RAMI research program took 14 months from initial discussions to the program kick-off, and the initiation of the Action Research project was preceded by months of promoting the research idea to various companies before the right collaboration partner was found. Traditional academic research is no stranger to long research processes, but theorizing with managers seems to be a particularly complex, time-consuming and expensive research approach, and thus best suited for highly prioritized research projects (Schiele & Krummaker, 2011). An additional challenge with collaborative theorizing processes is that the time-consuming recruitment of the participating managers is often conducted by the most senior members of the academic research teams – and these efforts are seldom recognized by universities' key performance indicators. Selling ideas to managers is neither research, teaching nor service! The only research program that did not involve a separate recruitment phase was the CMP program, which involved post-graduate executive students as the participating managers in collaborative theorizing.

The second tension between theorizing with managers and current academic practices relates to publishing. As discussed previously, theorizing with managers relies heavily on abductive reasoning – which, in turn, can be highly creative (Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Magnani, 2001; van Maanen et al., 2007). As put by Mingers (2014), 'imaginative leaps' are central to abduction: "Abduction is the point where novelty, innovation and creativity enter the scientific method, as indeed they must" (ibid, p.53). However, most journal reviewers are more comfortable with deductive or inductive reasoning, and therefore researchers using abduction should be prepared for reviewer criticism along the lines 'where did your findings come from, how to you prove their reliability and validity?' In our experience, reporting

abductive research results in academic outlets requires understanding the nature of abductive conclusions and disclosing the creative theorizing process in sufficient detail. As Shank (1988) highlights, abductive conclusions are plausible and meaningful – but not 'true' in the same sense as deductive conclusions. Thus, deductive and inductive studies are needed to complement abductive conclusions if theory testing and justification are sought after (van Maanen et al., 2007). When it comes to reporting research results, Dubois and Gadde (2002, pg. 560) make a strong case for disclosing the abductive learning process in addition to the final results: "How we learn is only occasionally discussed in a research report. […] Discoveries, which cannot be planned in advance, force us to reconsider the prevailing framework. The combined efforts of these successive steps in the learning process are seldom explicitly presented to the reader. We are convinced that learning in the research society as a whole would be improved if more of the processes of how we have learned were revealed to the reader." Openness about the sometimes messy and oftentimes long (up to 12 years from the involvement with managers to the write-up of the academic articles) theorizing processes has been particularly important when publishing results from Consortia and Action Research programs, as these studies have relied on 'reversed' theorizing process: first creating the managerial applications (collaboratively with the managers), and only after that specifying and documenting the theoretical contributions (academic research team working alone).

Finally, we should not be naïve about the possible ethical challenges associated with theorizing with managers. The concern that practitioners could persuade academics to pursue research questions that are rigged to generate results beneficial to practitioners' subjective objectives is already documented in the literature (c.f., Kieser & Leiner, 2012). In addition to this, the examination of the various choices that researchers have to do – explicitly or implicitly – when designing research processes involving practitioners (Figure 1) illuminates

further areas for concern. For example, we suspect that research processes in which research questions are defined by managers, managers and academics are equal partners in theorizing, and which involve a significant monetary investment from the participating organizations are more vulnerable for possible ethical misconduct – especially as research funding from the private sector is becoming an increasingly important element in universities' incentive systems. However, we are not suggesting shunning collaborative theorizing processes that involve private investments; more often than not, firms' willingness to invest in research is not a signal of hidden and malicious interest but a sign of sincere commitment, putting one's money where one's mouth is. The academic community has merely to be more aware of the nuances and possible pitfalls of theorizing with managers, and demand sufficient disclosure that enables assessing research processes also from the ethical perspective.

6. Contributions and implications

The paper has addressed the issue of how to overcome the theory-praxis gap by theorizing with managers. We undertook a comprehensive literature review to develop a framework for designing collaborative theorizing processes. We then illustrated the use of the framework with four long-term research programs that the authors have directed and discussed the implications of creating academic knowledge in collaboration with practitioners.

6.1. Theoretical and practical contributions

The first contribution of the paper comes from illuminating an approach to theorizing that produces academic knowledge that has managerial relevance. Thus we answer the call by a number of authors (e.g. Reibstein, Day & Wind, 2009; Starkey & Madan, 2001; Jaworski,

2011; Kristof, 2014) for the need for theorizing processes that leads to practical usefulness as well as rigorous academic contributions. In particular the contribution comes from directly addressing how theorizing with managers should happen. The framework illustrated in Figure 1 elucidates the decisions that researchers have to make when designing theorizing processes involving managers – and therefore the framework can be used as a research process design tool. The framework and the four illustrative research projects explaining its use go beyond the extant academic literature which provides a plethora of explanations and remedies to bridging the theory praxis gap but provides little guidance about it should happen.

The second contribution of the paper comes from grounding collaborative theorizing processes in the philosophy of science. Our research posits that theorizing with managers often uses abductive reasoning as the main mode of inference. The literature review established that even though certain characteristics of abduction – such as creativity and the interplay between conceptual and empirical domains – are widely agreed upon, there are various definitions for 'abduction'. Therefore, we suggest that researchers interested in theorizing with managers recognize and appreciate the differences in abductive reasoning. Additionally, when reporting the research, it is not enough to simply refer to the research as 'abductive' – clarification is needed about in what way it is 'abductive'.

6.2. Further research

As the present research is one of the first ones addressing how theorizing with managers should take place, future research is needed to develop this approach further. While the framework illustrated in Figure 1 illustrates the various decisions that need to be made when designing a collaborative theorizing process involving managers as active participants, deeper

understanding is needed about the various designs that can be derived from Figure 1. Which combinations seem to deliver both academically rigorous and managerially relevant results, which combinations are not feasible, and which combinations might be vulnerable for ethical misconduct? In order to answer these questions, there is a need to examine similar approaches in other disciplines. For example, the Information Systems discipline differentiates theories for design and action from theories for analyzing, explaining and predicting (Gregor 2006). Recently Gregor and Hevner (2013, pg. 338) explore design science research as an approach that "contributes to both research and professional practice."

In a similar vein, future research is also needed about the subjects of collaborative theorizing: academics and managers, and their capacities to participate in such processes. For instance, we discussed the importance of involving 'reflective practitioners' (Schön, 1983) when theorizing with managers. How can one assess managers' reflective capabilities prior to initiating lengthy and costly collaborative theorizing processes? Can managers be educated in both reflection and reflexivity in order to enhance their theorizing skills? Another topic relates to bilingualism of academic researchers and the need for academics in the team to be fluent with the managerial "think" and "speak". Does this mean that the academics involved in theorizing with managers should have practical experience?

In addition to generating more detailed understanding on how to theorize with managers and who to involve in such processes, attention needs to be given to the limits of collaborative theorizing. For example, not all theorizing processes that involve managers in any capacity should be re-labelled as theorizing with managers. Thus, we need definitions and descriptions about managers' various roles in theorizing processes: when are managers informants and when managers' involvement can be described as active participation in theory development?

Finally, theorizing with managers is not a silver bullet that is able to bridge the theory-praxis gap for all research questions and in all contexts. Therefore, future research is needed about the conditions under which collaborative theorizing is likely to be more successful – and when other approaches such as improved communication of research results (Hambrick, 1994), appreciation of context-specific nature of findings (Suddaby, 2006) or revision of quality standards (Pettigrew, 1997) are more suitable solutions for achieving simultaneous academic rigor and managerial relevance.

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