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Engaged scholarship: encouraging interactionism in entrepreneurship and small-to-medium enterprise (SME) research.

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Abstract

Purpose

This article introduces a multi-layered theoretical framework to enable engaged scholarship to develop as a practice in entrepreneurship and small business research. To do so, it illuminates the salient features of engaged scholarship, collaborative learning and actor-network theory.

Design/Methodology/Approach

The article follows a narrative or traditional literature review design. Specifically, it adopts a thematic approach for summarising and synthesising a body of literature on engaged scholarship, collaborative learning and actor-network theory with the view to developing a new multi-layered theoretical framework.

Findings

Applying the theory of engaged scholarship to pivot entrepreneurship/SMEs research provides scholars with an opportunity to unlock the theory vs. practice paradox. Moreover, engaged scholarship offers valuable instructions for encouraging interactionism between entrepreneurship researchers and practitioners as well as reconcile their polarised views. Co-production and co-creation of knowledge addresses the concerns often raised by the practitioner community regarding the relevance and applicability of academic research to practice.

Practical implications

The proposed multi-layered framework provides entrepreneurship researchers, and the practitioner community with a taxonomy to use for encouraging joint approach to research. Developing deep partnerships between academics and practitioners can produce outcomes that satisfy the twin imperatives of scholarship that can be of high quality as well as value to society.

Originality and value

The article advances the theory and practice of engaged scholarship in new ways that are not common in entrepreneurship/SME research. This enables engaged scholarship to develop as a practice in entrepreneurship and small firms research. Through applying the proposed multi-layered framework in research, academics can deliver fully developed solutions for practical problems. The framework is useful in the theory vs. practice and entrepreneurship researchers vs. practitioner debates.

Key words: entrepreneurship, engaged scholarship, theory/practice gap, SMEs, collaborative learning, actor-network theory, interactionism, practitioners.

Engaged scholarship: encouraging interactionism in entrepreneurship and small-to-medium enterprise (SME) research.

Introduction

It has been more than three decades following Susman and Evered's (1978) observation that research in scholarly management journals was remotely related to the real world of practicing managers. Since then, other scholars (e.g. Bartkus and Holland, 2010; Cohen, 2007; Empson, 2013; McKelvey, 2006; Pettigrew, 2001; Van de Ven and Johnson, 2006; Rynes *et al.*, 2001; Sandmann, 2008) have echoed the same sentiments highlighting the disparity between academic research and practice. The theory and research academics provide has also been criticised for its limitations in terms of informing practice, influencing the way organizations operate, and policy development (Barge and Shockley-Zalabak, 2008; Bansal *et al.* 2012). Some have argued that the content of academic research is too theoretical and often method-driven, and thus, too abstract for practitioners to apply, and most of the research questions are too narrow and trivial to managerial practice (Li, 2011; Starkey and Madan, 2001). Others have suggested that the actual problem of academic research is not so much about its relevance or applicability but, it is more about style, and design they claim is too academic, obscure, inaccessible and boring (Kieser and Leiner, 2009; Rynes *et al.,* 2001).

The presumption that academic research is of little value when dealing with the complexities of managerial situations clearly permeates the practitioner community (Aram and Salipante, 2003; Romme *et al.,* 2015; Tranfield and Starkey 1998). This impasse on the relevance of academic research perhaps requires that researchers reconsider the way they design and structure their inquiries about the social world. What is also clear in all of this is that academics and practitioners inhibit different worlds (Hodgkinson and Rousseau, 2009; Martin, 2010). On the one hand, practitioners navigate the complex socio-economic issues, and on the other hand, academics enjoy a degree of autonomy and many have no interest in addressing 'real world' problems (Martin, 2010; Starkey and Madan, 2001).

The gap between theory and practice in academic research presumably has to do with the epistemological and ontological incongruence often exacerbated by the polarised views of academics and practitioners. Considering this, it is however worth noting that the process for reducing the theory/practice gap and for reconciling the polarised views of academics should not be one-dimensional. For a start, it requires researchers to re-assess the way they engage in research. Likewise, this reflective approach to research should extend to practicing managers who often apply theoretical solutions and simulated business models to resolve complex issues in business (Antonacopoulou, 2010; O'Hare *et al.,* 2010; Starkey and Madan, 2001).

Instrumental and pragmatic arguments advance the idea that resolving the theory/practice gap is in the self-interest of practitioners and researchers as each will be better able to accomplish their purposes (Mohrman and Lawler, 2011). Thus, in trying to minimise the theory/practice gap as well as reconcile the polarised views of academics and practitioners, there is a greater need for encouraging mutual respect while developing shared approaches in problem solving (Antonacopoulou, 2010; Bartunek, 2007; Jordan, 1991; Miller and Stiver, 1997; Pearce *et al.,* 2008; Romme *et al.,* 2015; Santini *et al.,* 2016).

Like other academic disciplines the tension between practice and theory has also been recorded in entrepreneurship/SME research (Steffens *et al.* 2014). Academic research can almost never deliver fully developed solutions to any practical problems, and entrepreneurship research is no exception (Davidsson, 2002). Notwithstanding the improvements reported in entrepreneurship research and the theory about entrepreneurship and small business management, entrepreneurship is still considered to be of limited topical concern and value to practising managers (Aldrich and Baker, 1997; Bansal *et al.* 2012; Santini *et al.,* 2016). Maybe entrepreneurship research is yet to reach full potential as a field with substantive managerial application (Brazeal and Herbert, 1999; Lee and Hassard, 1999; Thatcher *et al.,* 2016). This might mean that it is about time entrepreneurship scholars considered different approaches to research as a way of increasing its relevance and applicability and consequently addressing concerns practitioners might have about their research.

Considering the above, this research turns to engaged scholarship for inspiration. It utilises this inclusive research approach to provide the basis for addressing questions about the relevance and applicability of academic research to practice (see, Bartunek and Rynes, 2014; Cummings, 2007; Van de Ven and Johnson, 2006). In doing so we argue that when academic researchers engage with practitioners in their communities to jointly develop theory and research, the probability of asking the right questions that have relevance to their managerial problems is increased (Barge and Shockley-Zalabak, 2008). Indeed, interactions between the practitioner community and academic researchers can produce results that have relevance to practice (Franz, 2009; Martin, 2010; Shani *et al.*, 2007). Drawing on this, we declare that proposals for improved managerial or business performance originating from practitioner-researcher interactions will have more practical relevance and applicability (Li, 2011) to practicing managers. In keeping with this debate Leitch (2007, p.144 in Neergaard and Ulhøi, 2007) explained that, "introducing alternative perspectives to knowledge production that combine theoretical content and practical relevance, may help alleviate some commentators' concerns about the applicability of entrepreneurship research in a practical context".

From that perspective, this article also seeks to introduce a multi-layered framework we consider to be a useful toolkit for encouraging researcher-practitioner interactions in entrepreneurship and small business management research. Specifically, the article engages in theory vs. practice and academic research vs. practitioner debates offering unique insights inspired by the idea of engaged scholarship. The theoretical constructs contained in the our newly proposed multi-layered framework presents entrepreneurship researchers with fresh knowledge and alternative arrangements for designing and structuring studies making them worthwhile and informative to entrepreneurship practice.

To produce the multi-layered framework, we comprehensively discuss collaborative learning, and action-network theory in the context of engaged scholarship – a concept commonly used in science and clinical studies. The contribution the research makes to entrepreneurship, a discipline which is still developing, is the multi-layered framework for developing engaged scholarship as a practice in entrepreneurship/SME research. In the article, we conceptualise engaged scholarship as an integral theoretical paradigm providing the necessary framework for reducing the tension between theory and the practice, while contributing valuable insights for reconciling the polarised views of entrepreneurship researchers and practitioners.

Engaged scholarship

Engaged scholarship is concerned with resolving and blending intellectual assets and academic questions with expertise and public-related issues that include the community, social, cultural, human and economic development (Holland, 2005; O'Hare *et al.,* 2010). As such, its ability to blend academic inquiries with know-how and experience justifies our rationale for using it comprehend entrepreneurship/SMEs research. Van de Ven and Johnson (2006 p. 80) provided a more refined description of engaged scholarship as the "collaborative form of inquiry in which academics and practitioners leverage their different perspectives and competencies to co-produce knowledge about a complex problem or phenomenon that exists under conditions of uncertainty found in the world". Conceptualising engaged scholarship in this way is insightful in that it offers social scientists in general, and entrepreneurship researchers in particular, the opportunity to create space for interaction. Clearly, practises that embrace co-production or co-creation (O'Hare *et al.,* 2010) of knowledge provide the necessary steps for addressing questions often raised by practitioners about the rigour, relevance and the applicability of academic research.

Furthermore, Welsh and Krueger's (2012) interpretation of engaged scholarship is useful in the theory/practice gap debate. Welsh and Krueger described its manipulating potency, emphasising its ability to bring together research and practice. Contributing to the same dialogue about the theory/practice tension Schön (1995, p.34) discussed engaged scholarship as "practice knowledge or actionable knowledge". He stressed that engaged learning and scholarship provide appropriate know-how necessary for generating space for practitioners to contribute their expertise and experience in research. Appropriate epistemology must account for and legitimise both academic knowledge and actionable knowledge often originating from practitioners (Sandmann *et al.,* 2008; Schön, 1995).

Questions about the legitimacy of research have been a major issue for entrepreneurship researchers for a long time. Walshok (1995) explained that legitimised knowledge regularises intellectual, analytical, and symbolic materials with working knowledge, a component of experience, and hands-on practice knowledge. In the same way Martin (2010) qualified the idea of legitimising research when he described practitioners as endorsers and co-researchers in a research project. He explained that in ensuring that research is relevant to policy development, for example, researchers and practitioners must work alongside each other at almost all stages during its design phase.

4

Based on the analyses above, we confirm that the opportunity to use engaged scholarship as a lens for reconciling the divergent views of academics, policy-makers and practitioners in entrepreneurship/SME research exists. But, as much as this might be the case, it can also be argued that for it to become a reality entrepreneurship researchers and practitioners must engage in high level collaborations. That is, engaging in cross-cutting activities from co-participation in the knowledge creation process (research) to its consumption and dissemination. More importantly, researchers and practitioners should take a genuine interest in providing practical solutions (Bartkus *et al.,* 2016; Landon *et al.,* 2012). Bjarnason and Coldstream (2003, p.323) commented that, "knowledge is being keenly pursued in the context of its application and in a dialogue of practice with theory through a network of policy-advisors, companies, consultants, think-tanks and knowledge brokers as well as academics". So, to encourage close cooperation between the practitioner community and academic researchers Davidsson (2002) Franz (2009) Sandmann and Weerts (2006) advise that academic scholars must adopt an engaging approach to research. They should prioritise membership in practitioner communities. Related to this, Boyer (1996) explained that engaged scholarship should be used as a conduit for connecting various functional units in an academic and community setting. He identified four types of scholarship, namely; scholarship of discovery, integration, sharing knowledge, and application. With respect to the scholarship of discovery, Boyer (1996) specifically challenged universities to champion knowledge creation through research.

As Boyer elaborated on various types of scholarships he highlighted the scholarship of integration stressing the need to place discoveries from university research into a wider context. This can be accommodating in entrepreneurship and small business research because of its focus on engaging the wider society which may lead to meaningful dialogue between practitioners and academic researchers. Focussing on connecting various stakeholders and the functions of research, teaching, and outreach in academic research, Franz (2009) underlines the importance of engaged scholarship (Van de Ven and Jing, 2012) as a conduit for bridging the gap between theory and practice. Indeed, establishing such connections can provide knowledge that potentially succours the process of reducing the tension between theory and practice in small business research. Boyer (1990, p.16) explained this more fully when arguing that the work of the scholar can be enhanced by stepping back from one's own investigation to look for connections, build bridges between theory and practice, and communicate one's knowledge effectively. This can also be about building relationships that involve negotiations and collaborations between

entrepreneurship scholars and the practitioners through communities of learning (Bartunek, 2007; Ladkin, 2004; Leitch, 2007).

According to Van de Ven and Jing (2012, p.127) practitioners interacting in a learning process "jointly produce knowledge that can both advance the scientific enterprise and enlighten an indigenous community". There is substantive evidence showing that the civic and academic health of any culture is vitally enriched when scholars and practitioners speak and listen carefully to each other (MacIntosh *et al.,* 2012). This can be related to Boyer's (1996) scholarship of knowledge sharing, which he declared a communal act. Clearly, when entrepreneurship researchers engage with practicing entrepreneurs in their studies, such acts will result in the creation of knowledge that reflects academic theory and field practice. This will significantly enhance the rigour and relevance of knowledge to practice thereby increasing its use (Romme *et al.,* 2015).

The point about utilising knowledge generated through research raised above resonates with Boyer's notion of knowledge application. His idea advances the school of thought that for research to be useful to both scholars and practitioners it must represent their combined views.

Drawing on Boyer's views, a type of research that could perhaps increase the probability of representing these combined visions is participatory action research whose principles are associated, in this article, with the idea of engaged scholarship. This method of seeking to explore an occurrence in business management encourages full and active engagement of both the researcher and the participants. More importantly, it allows a critical reflection and analysis of a society and its dynamics (Dover and Lawrence, 2010; MacIntosh *et al*, 2012). According to Reason and Bradbury (2001, p.1) participatory or action research is "a participatory process concerned with developing practical knowing in pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory worldview".

From that perspective, we affirm that incorporating diverse views in research can influence reconciliation, action, and reflection between entrepreneurship researchers and practitioners (Latour, 2005). This can be a fundamental undertaking in advancing entrepreneurship research. Moreover, it would make entrepreneurship-related research outputs relevant and valuable to practicing entrepreneurs as they seek to solve social problems that often conspire to influence their psychosocial circumstances. Kemmis *et al.* (2013) clarified participatory action research by stressing that it is practical and collaborative. Clearly, it engages people and it helps them to examine the social practices that links them with others in social

6

interactions (Kemmis, 2008). Most importantly, adopting the principles of participatory action research approaches in entrepreneurship encourages researchers to reflect on their practices of communication, production, and social organization.

Collaborative learning

The idea of actively engaging in collaborative networks when dealing with world problems and for research purposes is well-established in the science industry (see March, 1991; Powell, Koput and Smith-Doerr, 1996; Powell, 1990; Sen and MacPherson, 2009; Tolstoy and Agndal, 2010; Simba, 2013). An integral part of a joint problem-solving or research initiative is the co-participation of the main stakeholder groups. One would expect to find academics, industry experts, government and public-sector organisations to be the main stakeholders in a typically collaborative network (Cooke, 2002) regardless of the industry or sector.

According to O'Hare *et al.* (2010) engaging in collaborative activities has many benefits including knowledge creation and its sharing, and most of all it offers unique and informative insights into theory, policy and practice. Extending their views on collaborative working, Taylor and Thorpe (2004) explained that in such an arrangement learning is not isolated from socio-cultural and historical factors. Looking at this from an engaged scholarship perspective it is conceivable that academics who often take interest in exploring the social world of small businesses for example, are presented with the opportunity to understand, as participants, the socio-cultural problems militating against their circumstances.

Social constructionist and activity theorists conceptualise learning as a developmental process which often occurs within the relationships or networks in which a person is engaged (Holman et al., 1996; Taylor and Thorpe, 2004). The importance of network-centred learning is well-rehearsed in the literature (see for example, Birley, 1985; Blundel and Smith, 2001; Cope, 2003; Hills *et al.*, 1997; Gibb, 1997). Specifically, the link between engaged scholarship and network-centred learning or collaborative form of research was established in Van de Ven and Johnson (2006). Van de Ven and Johnson agreed that real-world problems are too complex to be captured by any one perspective. A combination of diverse views can provide robust solutions that can be relevant to various stakeholders. It therefore follows that developing learning networks or collaborative research communities to function as a stage for knowledge sharing and its exchange (Davenport and Prusak, 1998; Nonaka, 1994; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995) can be the panacea for bridging the theory/practice gap while increasing the acceptance of proposed solutions. Consistent with this, Jack *et al.* (2008) considered that collaborating in networks

7

provide a forum for investigating the "social" in entrepreneurship and prescribe relevant/practical solutions.

Within the networking literature there is a near universal agreement that engaging in collaborative activities is one of the most effective ways of enabling the exchange and the sharing of knowledge among various stakeholder groups (Balestrin, Vargas and Fayard, 2008; Corno *et al.,* 1999; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Provan and Sebastian, 1998). Relevant to this study, Bartkus and Holland (2010); Van de Ven and Johnson (2006) offer some insights into the academic/ practitioner divide debate. Van de Ven and Johnson share the view that engaging in collaborative activities that comprise research design including carrying out and implementing research to understand a social problem increases the relevance and practicality of the knowledge generated.

Based on this understanding, one can assume that in order to reduce the theory/practice gap knowledge must be co-produced between academics and practitioner communities (Van de Ven and Johnson, 2006) through joint research and research based on set goals (Latham, 2007).

Actor-network theory

Actor-Network Theory (ANT) was originally developed in the early 1980s to describe the creation of socio-technical networks of aligned interests (Callon, 1986; Latour (1987). The idea of alignment of interest was further extended to focus on the dynamics of relationships (Law, 2000). ANT's emphasis on alignment of interest attracted its use in this research and particularly its ability to provide developmental steps needed in the process of reducing the theory/practice gap. Also, in informing entrepreneurship practice about the importance of developing shared commitment between entrepreneurship/SME researchers and practitioners, ANT was deemed valuable. Insofar as that is concerned, ANT's underlying ideology provides knowledge about the relational dimensions of actors in a network. This was recognised to be relevant for this study in that it presents entrepreneurship researchers with an opportunity to understand the importance of connecting with practitioners when carrying out research.

Related to the above, Latour (2005) described ANT as an important instrument for exploring a series of interacting networks in science and society. Actors in a network are known to perform an important role (Cooke, 2001) in developing relationships that enable knowledge creation and its sharing (Smith *et al.,* 2016; Simba, 2013). This focus on actors as key elements is fundamental to the debate engaged in this article, which is concerned with finding ways of

8

getting entrepreneurship researchers and practitioners to interact in a meaningful way and to jointly participate in creating new knowledge.

To further clarify the term *actor,* Callon and Latour (1981, p. 286) explained that, "actors are individuals who influence elements occupying space around them". Effectively, they translate their will into their own language (Boyer, 1996). This means that actors develop networks of aligned interest or actor-networks (Sidorova and Kappelman, 2011). Callon (1986) provided a detailed explanation of how actor-networks are created. He clarified that actor-networks are created by focal actors through the process of translation. Callon conceptualised translation as a process which is driven by negotiations from the point of view of the focal actor. The primary goal underpinning the notion of translation is to align the interests of other actors and the actor-network with the interests of the focal actor (Sidorova and Kappelman, 2011; Smith *et al.,* 2016). The actor-network theory assumes a radical relational approach in the way it defines actors in a network. In so doing, it advances the idea that actors in a network cannot accomplish their goals alone but, they can do so in relation to others (Law, 2000). Drawing on the notion of engaged scholarship, one can interpret that researchers who have an interest in understanding the social world inhibiting small business operations for example, they must reach out to the practitioners.

Since its (ANT's) original intended use was to explore interactions in science and the society, it has also been applied in several other disciplines ranging from cultural studies, social geography, clinical studies and in organisational studies (Law and Hassard, 1999). For example, in Greenhalgh and Stones (2010) ANT was used to explore the development of IT programmes in healthcare with the view to proposing theoretical perspectives arising from the question about what happens at macro-, meso- and micro-level when a government tries to modernise a health service with the help of big IT. Lee and Hassard (1999) applied ANT to develop arguments for organizational analysis, focussing on shifting from structural prescription to processual deconstruction, the associated political dimension concerning where and for whom boundaries are produced/consumed. While Smith, *et al.* (2016) used ANT to understand entrepreneurial leadership learning.

Clearly, ANT has been applied across several disciplines to highlight the procedures for network formation, network maintenance and how networks sometimes develop and disintegrate (Brown and Duguid, 1994; Cooke, 2002; Breschi and Malebra, 2005). In much of the literature on networks scholars have differentiated them according to their durability and stability

9

(Burt, 1992; Powell, 1990). These network distinguishing factors form the foundations of the relational dimensions of its key stakeholders (Cooke, 2001).

According to Powell and Grodal (2005) networks vary from short-term projects to long-term relationships and the different temporal dimensions have important implications for governance. Some are hierarchical in structure with a central authority (main actor) monitoring social activities (Ahuja, 2000; Powell, 1990). Others are what Powell and Grodal (2005) termed *heterarchical* because of their common features including: distributed authority and strong self-organisation. The later form of network structure (Ahuja, 2000) which considers its main actors equal may be relevant in facilitating co-research and effective dialogue in entrepreneurship research. Distributed authority and strong self-organisation may also help them (the main actor) to realise the importance of diverse and varied experiences, skills and knowledge. Based on this, there is ground for declaring that understanding ANT provides useful insights that can inform entrepreneurship practice especially about the need for co-operation and coordination in research. According to Smith, Rose and Hamilton (2010) the process of establishing a network involves simplifying heterogeneous entities into a 'system of association' which is called an actor-network. Smith *et al.* (2016) explained this more fully using Callon's (1986) idea of translation. They confirmed that the process of translation involves negotiations among human and non-human actors serving to define their interests and actions in the network.

From the above, it is clear to see that ANT is particularly accommodating in terms of engaging with the dynamic and contentious aspects of knowledge networks (Alferoff and Knights, 2009) either human or non-human. Given its ability to accommodate divergent views, ANT can be useful in reconciling the polarised views of entrepreneurship researchers and practitioners as well as for breaking down the boundaries between theory and practice (Latour, 1987). This is particularly relevant for this research which is aimed at developing a multi-layered framework for narrowing the theory/practice gap while reconciling the polarised views of the academics and the practitioner community. Moreover, ANT provides essential ingredients that contribute to the development of engaged scholarship as a practice in entrepreneurship/SME research because it accepts human and non-human interactions as fundamental to knowledge creation. ANT refuses to give credence to the boundaries between knowledge and application that, by default Mode 2 (transdisciplinary research, problem-based, immediate and judged by its utility in practical situations) reproduces by arguing for their reconciliation (Alferoff and Knights, 2009; Knights and Scarbrough, 2007). In Mode 2 of ANT, knowledge is produced in a context

of application involving a much broader range of perspectives; it is transdisciplinary being characterised by heterogeneity of skills. . .. It is more socially accountable and reflexive" (Gibbons, 2000, p. 160).

Research approach

This research follows a traditional or narrative literature review method (Cronin *et al,* 2008) unlike a systematic literature review which requires detailed secondary data collection procedures and the specific period within which data for analysis was selected (Gough *et al.,* 2012; McCabe, 2005; Parahoo, 2014). The principles of a traditional or narrative literature review which emphasises the need to focus on a specific subject area (Aveyard, 2010) helped this research to summarize and synthesise (Cronin *et al,* 2008) a body of literature relevant to engaged scholarship. To achieve this, we used three stands namely: engaged scholarship, collaborative learning and actor-network theory which we deduced from our main research aims and the extant literature. The procedure for sifting through secondary data was mainly guided by the three strands described above. We used them to closely examine the literature which yielded interaction as a common factor connecting the themes we mentioned above.

Adopting the principles of a selective approach to literature search directed us to studies whose dialogue was centred on theory/practice and practitioner vs. academic research. After gathering relevant literature sources both authors were involved in its analysis, evaluation and interpretation (Gray, 2013). This allowed the study to make solid suppositions emphasising the importance of interactions between scholars and practitioners in research on entrepreneurship/SMEs. From these inferences, we were able to develop a nuanced framework for encouraging entrepreneurship researcher and practitioner interactions in entrepreneurship/SME research. In so doing, we were able to address the aims of this study.

The research design we followed in this article was jointly informed by Coughlan's *et al.* (2007) and Cronin's *et al.* (2008) step-by-step guide and advice for doing literature review based studies. Their guide and advice highlighted that reviewing a body of literature consisting of the relevant studies and knowledge to address a specific topic can be useful in developing conceptual or theoretical frameworks.

11

Discussions

The promise engaged scholarship brings to entrepreneurship research as a foundation for reducing the so-called rigor/relevance gap between academic scholars and practicing professionals (Bartkus *et al.,* 2016; Van de Ven and Johnson, 2006) is useful. A great deal of literature concerning bridging this gap calls for academic researchers to develop deeper relationships with practitioners and for active practitioner involvement in research design and its implementation (Bartunek, 2007; Mohrman and Lawler, 2010). Clearly, this is about academic researchers establishing common ground in entrepreneurship research whereby the practitioner community participates by contributing its experience and expertise (Steffens *et al.,* 2014). In doing so, an ecosystem can be established enabling the co-creation and co-production of knowledge between entrepreneurship researchers and the practitioner community (Bansal *et al.,* 2012). Clearly, co-production and co-creation of new knowledge enhances open and integrative research processes in social and natural sciences and across research/science, practice and policy interrelationships (Page *et al.,* 2016). Such integrative knowledge production processes allow academic researchers and practitioners to work collaboratively to develop solutions to problems in the world of practice, thereby creating insights for the world of theory (Beech *et al.*, 2010; Chen *et al.,* 2013; Van de Ven, 2007). The literature is clear about the implications of co-production. It acknowledges that regardless of the form or type of research, ignoring co-production will only ever produce a partial perspective on a problem (Antonacopoulou, 2010; Bartunek, 2007). Thus, entrepreneurship research needs to acknowledge and build on these principles.

Related to the above, Chen *et al.* (2013) explained that the epistemological argument for engaged scholarship is that knowledge is situated and pluralistic, which implies that in undertaking research multiple forms of knowledge from multiple perspectives must be engaged. In other words, knowledge production in research must be multi-disciplinary involving researchers and practitioners. The interactive space promoted in the new multi-layered framework illuminating engaged scholarship as the anchor provides a genuine platform to co-produce relevant and applicable business management solutions to practicing entrepreneurs and business managers in general. Similarly, Cerf and Hemidy (1999) showed that effective co-operation between farmers and their advisors was fundamental to solving farm management problem. They first highlighted the discrepancies between farmers then proposed the establishment of a multi-disciplinary advisory body for decision-making and support to

12

overcome identified incongruities. The support they proposed was in the form of an operative frame of reference to increase the rigour and relevance of farm-management solutions.

Based on the above, it is clear to see that the process of engagement declared as a "communal act" in Boyer (1996) underpins the rigour and relevance of management solutions generated in diverse teams and/or *heterarchical* networks. It therefore means that academic researchers should aim to modify their research mentality by promoting methods of human and non-human interactions as they design their research (Callon, 1986; Brydon-Miller and Maguire, 2003) contrary to relying only on the rigor of research methods and their engagement with theory. Gulati (2007) advised that in situations where there is ambivalence on the part of academics about the value of mutually beneficial academic-practitioner relationships, attempts to create such relationships will likely require the efforts of boundary spanners. In relation to this Bartunek (2007) envisaged a situation where the academic-practitioner relationships happen as matter of course.

He conceptualised this as a process that will enliven research and practice by helping academic researchers and management practitioners enter each other's worlds without needing to cast their own worlds aside. Developing deep partnerships between academics and practitioners often results in outcomes that satisfy the twin imperatives of scholarship that can be of high quality as well as value to society (Hodgkinson and Rousseau, 2009). Pettigrew (1997) highlighted that such deep partnerships could also be of mutual benefit for both academics and practitioners without compromising the needs of either party in the relationship.

Building on the idea of developing deep relationships, Schiele and Krummaker (2011) discussed the scholar–practitioner collaborations consortium in which the practitioner participates as a "co-researcher" contributing to the research process at every stage. This is consistent with the debate in this article which emphasises dialogic relationships between academics and practitioners (Beech *et al.,* 2010) in a deliberately established interactive space (*heterarchical* network). Representing the views of academics and practitioners in a research design, strategy and implementation legitimises the findings of the research and in doing so makes them relevant and applicable in the practitioner community. Gulati (2007) provided a five-point plan for narrowing the theory/practice gap. Gulati's five steps of a normative model of management research highlighted the need for researchers to be sensitive to managerial practice when shaping their research questions, testing theory in the classroom, building theory, appreciating and

synthesizing the dialectic between theory and phenomenon, and becoming "bilingual interpreters" for and active collaborators with practitioners.

In contrast, Van de Ven and Johnson (2006) pointed out that involving practitioners in formulating research questions may steer the questions in a narrow, short-term or pluralistic direction. Contributing to the same discourse others have downplayed the paradoxes of academic–practitioner relationships. For example, Bartunek and Rynes (2014) did not attempt to reconcile the polarised views of academics and practitioners but encouraged ways of working with the dichotomies between them, arguing that doing so fosters healthy research and theory building. In the same way, Kieser and Leiner (2009) argued that researchers and practitioners cannot collaboratively produce research, they can only irritate each other. Related to this Kimberly (2007), were also cautious and they stressed that sometimes the quality of management research can be seriously compromised in cases where researcher–manager interactions unfold under conditions of role confusion or role ambiguity. Furthermore, Kimberly (2007); Rynes and McNatt (1999) confirmed that collaborative research endeavours can also be affected when there is no clarity about whether an academic is operating as a researcher or consultant in solving social issues of management.

Notwithstanding the above, the novelty of the research reported here lies in the application of engaged scholarship, often used in science and clinical studies, to advance entrepreneurship/SME research. We argue that engaged scholarship has the potential to turn the irritations or provocations (Kieser and Leiner, 2009) that arise when practicing managers and academic researchers collaborate in research into inspiration.

In that regard, the multi-layered framework presented in Figure 1 is instructive. It provides new guidelines for both academics and practitioners as they seek to resolve entrepreneurial-related issues in business. Specifically, the framework offers a toolkit which can be applied to reduce the theory/practice tension while promoting ways of reconciling their polarised views. Most importantly, it informs entrepreneurship researchers and the practitioner community about the best posture to take in designing entrepreneurship research (Bartunek, 2007).

Engaged scholarship is used, in the framework, to anchor the interaction process between entrepreneurship practice and research, and to reduce the entrepreneurship

researcher/practitioner and theory-practice tensions (Davidsson, 2002). It (engaged scholarship) is presented as a moderating variable in the process of developing *heterarchical* networks represented as the interactive space (Smith *et al.,* 2016) in Figure 1. Clearly, the multi-layered framework emphasises engagement, involvement and interaction (Van de Ven and Johnson, 2006).

It advances the idea that researchers and practitioners must jointly investigate complex entrepreneurship issues by participating at all the stages of the research process including; formulating problems, building theory, designing research, and solving problems (Bansal *et al.*, 2012; Tranfield and Starkey, 1998).

Insert Figure 1 here

The interactive space (*heterarchical* networks) illustrated in Figure 1, also advances the ideas of co-production and co-creation that are conceptualised as components of engaged scholarship. Within this interactive space entrepreneurship researchers and practitioners can engage in various activities. These activities may include soliciting advice, and feedback from practitioners during the research process, sharing power in collaborative researcher–practitioner teams, and jointly evaluate policies and programs (Van de Ven, 2007).

Arguably, if the knowledge generated by entrepreneurship researchers is to be considered relevant and useful to entrepreneurship practice, it is imperative that practitioners have a direct input into the research process (Aram and Salipante, 2003). In other words, academics should create actor networks (Callon, 1986) by finding ways of establishing working relationships within the practitioner community (Davidsson, 2002). As explained already this view originates from the idea of co-production, which is a modest form of engagement offering a rather neat way of beginning to reconcile the tension between safeguarding academic freedom and increasing utilization of research (Anderson *et al.,* 2017; Martin, 2010).

Furthermore, the interactive space acts as an invitation to entrepreneurs and practitioners, encouraging them to be reflective about their respective research practices (Antonacopoulou, 2010) through meaningful exchanges. The assumption is that through interacting they each can expose the incompleteness of their research practices. Based on that hypothesis, engaged scholarship can provide an avenue for creating relevant, applicable and legitimate knowledge while reducing the paradoxical tension (Smith and Lewis, 2011) between the researcher and the practitioner community. The issue of relevance and applicability of

15

research is not necessarily distinct. As such, the proposed framework recognises this complementarity and the underlying message is that scholarship that does not attempt to accomplish both could be harmful for both entrepreneurship/SME research and entrepreneurship practice (Bartunek and Rynes, 2014; Gulati, 2007).

In addition, the framework illustrates that for academic research to influence entrepreneurship and small business management both the practitioner community and entrepreneurship researchers must be implicated in the research. Co-design between researchers and practitioners, cycling back and forth between each other's knowledge and experience, is an important mode of knowledge development (Romme, 2003; Van Aken, 2005). Undoubtedly, incorporating the views of all the parties involved in its creation increases its relevance, applicability and legitimacy. In that regard, it can be argued that co-ownership transcends beyond current conventional research approaches in entrepreneurship/SME and business management. The emphasis is on association (Latour, 1986). That is, the connections that have been established between collaborating parties. The idea of association between entrepreneurship researchers and the practitioner community is an important facet of their knowledge, actions, theories and practices (Antonacopoulou, 2010). Such interrelationships provide a balance between theory and practice and they ultimately reconcile the incongruent view of academics and practitioners.

The new multi-layered framework can also be useful in entrepreneurship and business studies in several ways. It can be applied to management research in general, in science and art, and more specifically in entrepreneurship/SME research. But to validate its moderating effect in the theory/practice and scholar-practitioner debate, we invite other scholars to empirically test the framework by exploring the casual relationships of the variable it contains.

Conclusions

The framework proposed in this article is the main contribution the article makes to entrepreneurship/SME research. We demonstrated that the proposed multi-layered framework is an effective instrument for informing entrepreneurship/SME research because of its theoretical and practical dimensions. The model neatly brought together theoretical constructs presented in the wider literature (e.g. from Bansal *et al.* 2012; Bartunek, 2007; Kenworthy-U'ren *et al.*, 2005; Kor *et al.,* 2016; Van de Ven, 2007; Van de Ven and Jing, 2011) in new ways that are not common in entrepreneurship/SME research. This was a clear demonstration that the nuanced multi-layered framework can advance entrepreneurship/SME research in a meaningful and

powerful way. It can enable members of the scholarly and practitioner communities to appreciate the essence of working alongside each other at almost all the stages of developing, designing and implementing research (Barge and Shockley-Zalabak, 2008).

The implications of research are three-fold. Firstly, academic scholars will become aware of the importance of combining 'inquiry from the outside' e.g. research models from researchers with 'inquiry from inside' e.g. knowledge and experience from entrepreneurship practitioners, and policy-makers (Evered and Louis, 1981; Kor *et al.,* 2016; Mahoney and Sanchez, 2004). Secondly, when academics partner with practitioners in research, it legitimises the research outcomes from the perspective of practicing managers. Thereby overcoming their concerns about the relevance and the applicability of academic research in solving the social problems militating their entrepreneurship practice. Thirdly, academic researchers and practitioners will be challenged to reconsider their research approaches. In fact, they will be convinced to establish a space for interacting with each other and engage in a meaningful dialogue. Moreover, they will be influenced to respect each other's point of view, which will be helpful in reconciling their divergent worlds.

Finally, the study concludes by recommending that both academic researchers and practitioners must recognise that resolving the theory/practice gap requires a multi-disciplinary approach and it is in their self-interest as each will be better able to accomplish their purposes. So, time and effort must be invested in developing research syndicates involving academics, policy-makers and practitioners. Specifically, *heterarchical* networks characterised by distributed authority and strong self-organisation must be established at individual and institutional levels. Doing so will facilitate meaningful dialogue while developing engaged scholarship as a practice in entrepreneurship/SME research.

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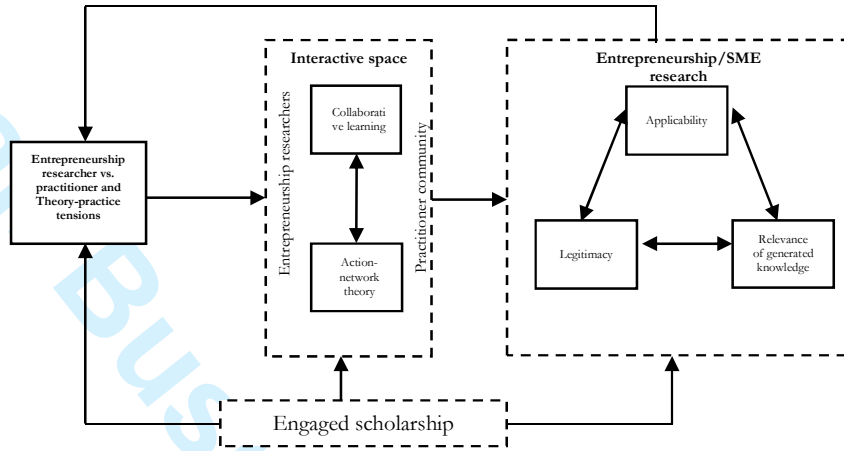
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23

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Figure 1: A framework for encouraging entrepreneurship researcher/practitioner interactions