In Praise of Involvement

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Summary
Involvement is an important element of good research and a route to impact. In line with early organizational analysis, we advocate involvement with research stakeholders and investing in the necessary communication and rhetorical skills.

Keywords
business and society, impact, involvement

Impact as Involvement
What is the point of social science, business, and organizational research? As scholars, our very focus is on the relationship between business and society. Such a focal point not only suggests the potential for impact, it also screams of being involved with those we study, and those who are affected by what we study.

With few exceptions, impact is a by-product of some degree of involvement. We advocate for involvement in its own right, as part of good research. In doing so, we encourage the consideration of research as a circular economy rather than a supply chain of ideas delivering nuggets of knowledge for impact. This might manifest as taking full responsibility for our work;

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embracing our research and scholarship as a laboratory of learning; understanding and sharing what we do; investing time in building relationships; learning to speak the language of those who might find the research important; listening to the feedback of those who have a practical interest in or objection to our research. In short, not focusing myopically on a paper production line that only has meaning when a journal acceptance email arrives. We should instead aim for what Bent Flyvbjerg argues convincingly to be the position that *social science matters*; that our work should be

an activity done in public for the public, sometimes to clarify, sometimes to intervene, sometimes to generate new perspectives, and always to serve as eyes and ears in our ongoing efforts at understanding the present and deliberating about the future. (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 166)

**It Was Ever Thus**

These are not radical or new ideas. They date far back, beyond the more recent foray into engaged scholarship, or similar arguments for knowledge co-creation, participative inquiry, grand challenge or phenomenon-led research, and tackling of wicked problems. From its very inception, organizational analysis was a practical enterprise as well as an intellectual one. Notably, it emerged from *within* organizational life itself, rather than from academia (du Gay & Vikkelso, 2017). For example, classical organization scholars such as Chester Barnard and Mary Parker Follett worked within the orbit of that which they sought to study and better comprehend, and it was from this direct practical involvement that they pursued ambitions of identifying and clarifying principles and practices of ‘good’ organization and management. In their different ways, they regarded the constitution of organization and management as crucial to society and business.

For both Barnard and Parker Follett, good organization was not an issue exclusive to the operation of an enterprise in a technically or instrumentally efficient manner, but a key ethico-political concern. Parker Follett’s (1940/1982, p. 29) principle of “dynamic administration”—and the issues of authority, power, leadership, conflict, and conciliation that flowed from it—was by no means conceived of by her as exclusive to business, but rather as “a part, and a significant part, of the wider field of human government.” In contrast to an assumption that pursuing impact might make us beholden to business, and unable to apply critical scholarship, we find many ways in which even abstract research which may seem far from the practical concerns of business can, through processes of involvement, have an impact.
Instances of Involvement

There are numerous recent examples of challenging, high-quality research which have generated impact through involvement. Garima Sharma and Tima Bansal (2020) have shown how the most academic of exercises, the systematic literature review, can effect sustainable decision making when practitioners are involved in the process, while acknowledging the need to navigate arising tensions. Hari Bapuji and Paul Beamish (2019, p. 1637) demonstrated how their involvement with multiple stakeholders and communicating in different formats “shaped public opinion, changed MNE behavior, and had a positive impact on product-safety developments.” Louise Ashley has worked with the U.K. Government’s Social Mobility Commission and leading legal and financial services firms in London to identify entrenched recruitment of elites, and has worked directly with relevant stakeholders to determine how the situation can be improved. She went on to challenge inadequate organizational social mobility programs which succeed in contradicting espoused inclusion and diversity initiatives (Ashley, 2021). Shining the light on our own world, Alessia Contu develops the case for intellectual activism, illustrated by the collective Vida which grew out of the critical management studies community and is described as “progressive political work in action since it was born as part of the struggles against sexism, discrimination, imperialism and capitalist exploitation, and self-exploitation” in business schools (Contu, 2020, p. 751).

A more detailed example from some of our own work is perhaps useful to illustrate how research is amenable to involvement and in turn impact. Involvement can be a part of both conceptual and empirical work. Much of Laura Spence’s research has been centered on the topic of small business social responsibility. Building on many years of empirical work on small firms, in 2016, in this journal, Laura published a paper in which she used the case of small firms to argue for a redrawing of two classic corporate social responsibility (CSR) theories—stakeholder theory and Carroll’s pyramid of CSR—from an ethic of care perspective (Spence, 2016). This work connected to further theoretical work with colleagues on firm size, cost and patterns of CSR (Wickert et al., 2016), and CSR communication from a Foucauldian perspective (Morsing & Spence, 2019). Research findings ran counter to some of the received wisdom around CSR, highlighting different stakeholders, drivers, mechanisms, and measures for small business social responsibility.

All three papers are theory-heavy, and neither written for, nor expected to be read by, business practitioners or policy makers, although it was clear that the studies were generating information which could, in practical ways,
improve support for small business social responsibility. Laura’s involve-
ment with a range of practice and policy stakeholders during the years of the
projects enabled the sharing of these findings. Dialogue and exchange
resulted in long-term collaboration with a leading construction industry net-
work, a U.K. parliamentary group on corporate responsibility, a business eth-
ics charity, and an International Labour Organization business network.
Different forms of communication were needed according to the nature of the
involvement. These included presentations, training webinars, collaboration
on an e-learning module for small business, an advocacy piece (Spence,
2020), informal discussions over many years, chairing an industry–academic
collaboration board, interviews (in both directions), blogs, videos, and many
opportunities for feedback on strategy and policy documents relating to sup-
porting small business social responsibility. Involvement directly with busi-
ness, nongovernmental organizations, and policy makers was rewarding and
enriching to the researcher and the work itself, and is ongoing.

**Investing in Involvement**

Taking involvement seriously not only requires time to invest in building
long-term partnerships. It also takes a good deal of courage to take a stance
on a particular course of action and take responsibility for our claims, when
someone is potentially going to follow our advice and face real-world conse-
quences. Being involved with those from outside academia is not always
easy; it isn’t effective to just email them our academic papers. It is perhaps
useful to engage with our rhetorical capacities in terms of familiar academic
qualities of the *ethos* of our credibility as experts, and the quality of our argu-
ments in the rational logic of *logos*. In addition, the empathy and imagination
of *pathos* can be helpful, and timing is critical: It is hard to get anyone’s atten-
tion if the issue at hand is not seen as timely and relevant, so attention to
*kairos* is also important.

In employing these rhetorical devices, skills are required to communi-
cate academic thought without assuming that others know the acronyms,
prevailing arguments, or have done the ‘requisite pre-reading.’ That
includes developments in listening skills too, to understand what partners
need and want to know, and how a meaningful response can be crafted. It
requires being ready to deliver disappointing or controversial ideas, not just
giving practitioners ammunition for a decision they have already taken. It
might be necessary to point to the research of others, if they are better
equipped to inform decisions, and acknowledge the narrowness of our indi-
vidual expertise. Sometimes, an intermediary or “mediating middle” may
be helpful to bridge any gap (Bastow et al., 2014, pp. 54–55). Private sector
research organizations, journalists, think tanks, civil servants, and consultants often have these skills in abundance and can be valuable partners.

To conclude, not every project needs to have immediate and obvious impact opportunities, and neither is it helpful for academics to act as servants of business or the state, ready to do their narrow bidding. Researchers can and should still have their own agendas. But we do advocate for involvement with the stakeholders of our social science, business and organizational scholarship, as an inherent part of good research. And somewhere along the line, for a business and society researcher, wouldn’t it be odd if we didn’t want to be involved in the world we study?

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