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Lessons from Practice: Extensions of Current Negotiation Theory and Research

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Abstract

Negotiation is in essence a practical skill. We identified the need to increase the number of academic contributions related to negotiation practice. The goal of this special issue – edited by Ramirez Marin, Druckman, and Donohue-- is to call attention to areas in which research informs the practice, as well as areas in which the practice calls for advances in theory. The five papers included in this issue illustrate different ways in which practice can help academics extend the current theory. For example, describing how the predictions made by current theories can inform the practice, adapting and applying hostage negotiation principles to everyday negotiations, or testing the limits of current theories by adding external constraints and dependencies between and within negotiation issues. These examples can help researchers and teachers to bridge theory with practices as well as improve the way practitioners use evidence to improve their interventions.

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The world economic forum (WEF) established negotiation as one of the 10 most important practical skills to have in 2020 (WEF, 2016). However, on August 1st, 2020, a search of one of the top negotiation journals during the past 5 years yielded no results with the word *practice* in the title. Moreover, on the same date, a Google Scholar search with the keywords *negotiation* and *conflict* and *practic*e in the title yielded 27 results but only 3 results if the search is limited to the past 5 years. At NCMR, a word search performed in May 2022 with the keyword *practice* in the title yielded 13 results excluding the five papers from this special issue. In these papers we can find useful examples of mediation (Kressel & Gadin, 2009), sustainability (Eliott & Kauffmann, 2016), the theory-practice link (Broome, 2017; Gross, 2018; Hogan, Frey, Kim & Clements, 2017; Olekalns, Shestowsky, Skratek & De Pauw, 2019; Putnam, Olekalns, Conlon & De Dreu, 2020), education (Ebner & Parlamis, 2017; Fisher & Fisher Yoshida, 2017; Jameson, Brinkert & Raines, 2018), high-stakes conflict (Oostinga, Rispens, Taylor & Ufkes, 2018), consulting practices (Druckman, 2019), and journalism (Ha et al., 2020).

This evidence suggests that there is a lacuna in the literature. Nonetheless, practitioners often consult with academics about advice on conflict and negotiations. Practice can be a resource for investigating the limits of current negotiation and conflict management theories. Practice can also help academics engage in a reality-check process that contributes to our understanding of the phenomenon. This special issue is intended to bring various types of practices closer to ongoing and planned research. The goal of our special issue is to showcase two types of contributions: 1) examples in which research informs the practice, and 2) examples from practice that aim to extend current negotiation and conflict management theory.

Action Science as a Theoretical Foundation

This special issue is, in part, a response to the call by Argyris (1980; 1995) and Argyris and Schon (1989) to build social scientific inquiry from an action science perspective. The goal of action science is to learn the “theories in use” participants bring to practice so that researchers can build more externally-valid conceptual frameworks from their insights. Over time, researchers and practitioners create an iterative partnership to learn from one another with the goal of incorporating these practitioner insights into more valid theories. How can theories become better at capturing key phenomena while also improving the work of practitioners?

While action science is traditionally viewed as a product of the interaction of practitioners and researchers, it can also be viewed as a framework for individual scholars to explore their phenomena of interest. Scholars, particularly in fields such as conflict that are rich with practitioners, can assume the role of practitioners from time to time to help inform, conceptualize and strategize together. Researchers in the field of conflict occasionally assume practitioner roles or explore how their phenomena of interest apply in actual conflict settings. Thus, our goal in this special issue is to reinforce the value of an action science perspective in exploring conflict phenomena.

What can we learn from researcher-practitioner collaborations to extend our knowledge of conflict? Each article provides examples of this learning. These include applying insights from practice that are developed further by research, using insights from research as lenses for helping practitioners work through difficult problems, and entering researcher-practitioner collaborations where both roles conceptualize and strategize together. They also include working together prior to negotiation to diagnose when parties are ready to enter the talks and learning about structural constraints on practitioners that are infrequently considered in laboratory experiments. The idea that runs through the articles in this issue is that action science is a useful perspective for making progress in managing conflicts.

Content of the Special Issue

A total of 23 initial proposals were received between August 28th and October 20th 2020. A total of 12 full papers were submitted. Eight manuscripts had practitioners as first authors, and four were led by academics. Five papers were finally accepted. The practical examples described on the original submissions stemmed from multiple fields such as: industrial relations, family businesses, government agencies, university management, international conflict, business to business negotiations (B2B), mergers and acquisitions, etc. The number and the diversity of submissions reflect an interest for the topic, as well as a need for journals to focus on practice.

The content of this special issue is organized into two parts. The first part consists of two articles from researchers who have assumed practitioner roles as consultants, diplomats and managers (Cai; Druckman & Donohue). These two articles contain specific examples from which anyone can draw useful advice. The next three papers present collaborations between academics and practitioners and present three different contexts in which the practice can extend the theory: cross-cultural mergers and acquisitions (Rana, Druckman & Canduela), corporate governance (Kern & Murphy), and B2B negotiations (Mann et al.).

More specifically, the article by Cai is an incredibly useful read for those dealing with difficult colleagues. The examples are derived from an academic setting but most of their content is generalizable to other organizations. The author elaborates on five principles derived from research in hostage negotiation and applied to conflict situations in academic organizational settings. The principles are: building rapport, message affect, relational goals, communication, and taking time. The examples include having a difficult conversation with a colleague after receiving a series of complaints and managing discrimination claims at the workplace. The article identifies several insights from Cai's practice that have interesting theoretical implications. For example, from her practice, Cai learned about a disputant tactic called *manufactured agreement* which is aimed at creating the illusion of support for a position. The article talks about how this concept might influence outcomes in a conflict.

The article by Druckman and Donohue views the theory-practice nexus through two lenses, the role of consulting analyst and the role of conciliator. Consulting examples include research on international alliances, negotiation turning points, and how matters of procedural justice come into play in the context of climate negotiations. Conciliation examples how framing research is used in the context of practice when solving a conflict over laboratory space with a faculty member. Each of the examples include a section about the lessons learned for the practice, in where the authors capture the way research adds value to practice challenges. They conclude with suggestions for how graduate education in the social sciences can be structured for developing pracademic skills. Perhaps the real value of the article is understanding how key insights from the consulting and conciliation process can stimulate important research questions that can move conflict research forward.

The article by Rana, Druckman, and Canduela is an example of a collaboration between practitioners and academics. The authors use a framework for analyzing turning points (TPs) in their cases of cross border mergers and acquisitions (CBMA) negotiations. They performed an analysis of nine negotiations between automobile manufacturers. This entailed coding each part of the framework, referred to as precipitants, departures, and consequences. The results provide a comparative picture of the dynamics in terms of the prevalence of each of these parts. They also shed insight into the way coalitions are formed and dissolved between union and management. A particularly interesting feature is a proposal for a two-stage collaboration between researchers and practitioners with an example of how this can be done. The goals of the collaboration are to both enhance an understanding of the key turning points construct while trying to refine strategies for conducting more effective cross-border mergers and acquisitions negotiations.

The article by Kern and Murphy is another example of a collaboration between practitioners and academics. The authors build on theory of collaborative governance processes and describe in detail: 1) the conditions that are necessary to initiate a collaborative governance process, and 2) the conditions that are essential to sustain this process. They elaborate on the need to identify the *readiness* (the individual motivations and believes of individuals related to their ability to prevail in the conflict) to determine the extent to which the situation is *ripe* (the joint decision that parties are ready to collaborate) to resolve the conflict. A set of 11 questions guide the assessment of each party's readiness to initiate and sustain a collaborative negotiation process. Based on their public policy experience, the authors suggest that success depends on evaluating process expectations before setting up the collaborative process. Thus, this article clearly demonstrates that when practitioners repeatedly observe an important process and collaborate with researchers to develop and refine it over time, both parties win. The constructs are more externally valid because the action science framework has been faithfully executed.

The article by Mann and colleagues is an excellent example of a common disconnect between practitioners and researchers that energizes the scientific iterative process. The article begins by acknowledging that practitioners have a more difficult time reaching mutually beneficial outcomes in buyer-seller negotiations than researchers expect based on empirical findings that favorable preconditions should lead easily to favorable outcomes. In a classic academic-practitioner collaboration, this article finds that this gap is a result of a structural dilemma. That is, practitioners find that B2B negotiations are characterized by specific tradeoff opportunities across multiple dimensions that are constrained by rigid financial constraints. Researchers recommend addressing this constraint by translating budgets into negotiation limits or budgetary parameters that can then be used to create tradeoffs. The transformation of a problem to an opportunity derived from an academic-practitioner collaboration can begin to extend the negotiation literature by investigating different types of tradeoffs.

Contribution of the Special Issue

Our special issue contributes to the field by highlighting examples in which the theory can help the practice, as well as, providing contexts in which the practice calls for an extension of the current theory. Moreover, this issue heralds a field at the juncture of several social science disciplines. We received submissions from colleagues in communication, economics and management, political science and several who worked for consulting companies. The articles provide examples of the challenges from public policy, academic management, international negotiation consultancy, business to business (B2B), and international business.

Most empirical articles on negotiation prioritize experiments over field research that are rarely built upon partnerships between practitioners and researchers. An action science perspective might argue that such partnerships should be more common in a field that assumes that the output of research findings should have some practical applications. Do the simulated settings used in experimental research capture the important constructs that impact real-world negotiators or mediators? The chances that researchers will have impact depends to a certain extent on our willingness to engage with practitioners in their worlds. The tools are there as illustrated by the articles in this issue. So too are models of researcher-practitioner collaboration as described in the article by Rana et al. Further, we are positioned better than other disciplines to have this sort of impact—in creating integrative agreements in the public and private sectors, in giving advice to hostage negotiators, purchasing managers, diplomats, family mediators, and even wine dealers or museum directors.

We encourage researchers to approach and embrace practice. Of note is that management scholars show an increasing interest in dealing with real world problems. Let's all take a step forward and collaborate with our fellow practitioners to solve problems. These collaborations can make a difference in the world and increase the impact of our field as the action science perspective promises. We conclude with quote from Lewin's, the originator of action research, "There is nothing more practical than a good theory" (Lewin, 1943).

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