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Research in Organizations

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The Challenge of Research in Organizations

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CHAPTER OUTLINE

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The title of this book, *Research in Organizations*, was purposeful. It is not simply about research *on* organizations. The context of the organization is fundamentally interesting to most people. Without any obvious initiation, organizational questions arise about leaders, purposes, strategies, processes, effectiveness, trends, workers, customers, and more.

Organizations are human-made entities. There are for-profit and nonprofit organizations, global and small locally held organizations, organizations having multiple purposes, and organizations producing a mind-boggling range of goods or services. As human-made entities, organizations engage all kinds of human beings. No wonder organizations and the functioning of human beings in relation to organizations are of such great interest to so many fields of applied endeavor.

Applied disciplines, by their very nature, require that theory and practice come together (Dubin, 1978; Lynham, 2002; Van de Ven, 2002). When they do not come together, there is angst. This angst of not knowing is a signal to both practitioners and scholars is that there is work to be done. Clearly, scholars from disciplines such as human resources, business, organizational behavior, education, sociology, and economics see organizations as meaningful contexts for their inquiry.

DEFINITION OF RESEARCH

Research is often thought of in terms of a job or a task. Actually, research is a process having a specific type of outcome. *Research is an orderly investigative process for the purpose of creating new knowledge.* Furthermore, the simple dictionary definition of portrays research as “1. Scholarly or scientific investigation or inquiry; 2. Close and careful study” (*American Heritage College Dictionary*, 2002, p. 1182).

Each of you reading this chapter has most likely done research and may even do research on a regular basis in certain arenas of your work and personal lives. You may not call it research. Even so, the psychological barriers to officially doing research remain and are typified by (1) the pressures of time limitations and/or (2) the concern over being criticized as to the significance, method, or conclusions. They are part of the human side of the research process.

In balancing the two barriers, researchers talk about the importance of humility and skepticism as attributes of a scholar. Certainly the press of time and the potential of criticism help keep the researcher humble. Internal skepticism keeps the researcher motivated. Researchers are skeptics extraordinaire. When somebody says, “I know everything will turn out well,” the researcher will retort, “Not necessarily.” When somebody says, “I know everything will go badly,” the researcher will similarly retort, “Not necessarily.” Unverified generalizations do not satisfy the researcher. They are the beginnings of research, not the conclusions.

THE RESEARCH PROCESS

While the general research process typically starts with a problem and ends with a conclusion, research is not just a problem solving method. Problem solving is

situational and is judged by the results, with or without a theoretical explanation. If through trial and error you learn to kick the lawn mower engine that will not start, and then it starts, the problem of getting the mower engine running is solved without any theoretical understanding. Yet, there is a point when problem solving and the generation of new knowledge touch or overlap. Very thorough and systematic problem solving that purposefully retains and reports data can move into the realm of research. Many people involved with research in organizations talk about *action research*. For example, action research is not considered research by some scholars. They would classify action research as a formalized method of problem solving relevant to a particular organization or setting.

As scholars in applied disciplines, the theory–practice dilemma is of particular importance. Most scholars in applied disciplines recognize *practice-to-theory* to be as true as *theory-to-practice*. Scholars are respectful of the fact that theory often has to catch up to sound practice in that practitioners can be ahead of researchers. Thoughtful practitioners often do things that work, and scholars learn how to explain the successes at a later time. For applied research in functioning organizations, the concept of the practitioner being a research partner is legitimate and crucial to the maturity of related applied disciplines.

From my experience in the profession, it is clear that thoughtful and expert practitioners do indeed apply research findings in their day-to-day work decisions. Whether they are *advancing* theory and practice is another matter. It is critical to the profession that numerous thoughtful practitioners recognize that they are in a perfect position to help advance the scholarship related to organizations (Swanson & Holton, 1997).

RATIONALE FOR CONDUCTING RESEARCH IN ORGANIZATIONS

Organizations are messy entities. Just studying people within organizations is challenging. Studying the information flow in organizations is challenging as well as studying power in organizations and the external economic forces and their impact on any phenomena in an organization. The list goes on.

Although scholars from many applied disciplines are drawn to the organization as the ultimate context of their scholarly focus, it is not always easy to conduct research in organizations. Organizations are worth studying, yet it is important to recognize that they are

- complex systems
- open systems
- dynamic systems

These system realities are the source of many scholarly and practitioner questions and the need for research-based answers. Such inquiry is for the sake of

understanding of the organization itself, a phenomenon operating within a host organization, or the behavior of the phenomenon in the context of the organizational and its external environment.

CHALLENGES OF CONDUCTING RESEARCH IN ORGANIZATIONS

Organizations are messy entities. Just looking at people in organizations is challenging. Looking at the information flow in organizations is challenging, as is power in organizations and the impact that external forces have on any phenomena in an organization. The list goes on.

While scholars from many applied disciplines are drawn to the organization as the ultimate context of their scholarly focus, it is not always easy to conduct research in organizations. It is the very attractiveness and complexity of organizations that stimulate this book focused on the principles and methods of inquiry for conducting research in organizations.

GENERAL STRATEGIES FOR CONDUCTING RESEARCH IN ORGANIZATIONS

Specific disciplines and individual scholars tend to rely on favored research methods. This condition will not likely change, and if there is change, it will likely be evolutionary. An important message of this book is that there are alternative inquiry methods that allow scholars to investigate a wider range of phenomena and to ask a wider range of important questions that exceeds any single research method.

This book is not intended to fuel epistemological discord among philosophers of research. Our position is that to bombard beginning scholars with this issue is counterproductive to the advancement of sound research in most applied disciplines. Most professions are complex enough that they deserve scholarship from all corners. Our role is to be rational and inclusive. Our simple overarching paradigm for research in organizations is to classify research into

- quantitative methods of research
- qualitative methods of research
- mixed methods of research

Quantitative research relies on methods based on “cause and effect thinking, reduction to specific variables and hypotheses and questions, use of measurement and observation, and the test of theories” (Creswell, 2003, p. 18). Qualitative research relies on methods based on “multiple meanings of individual experiences, meanings socially and historically constructed, and with the intent

of developing a theory or pattern” (Creswell, 2003, p. 18). Mixed-methods research relies on both quantitative and qualitative methods that are “consequence-oriented, problem-centered, and pluralistic” (Creswell, 2003, p. 18).

Readers wanting greater familiarity with these three approaches to research at this time may want to jump ahead and read the introductory chapters in each of these sections of the book (i.e., chapters 3, 13, and 18).

THE THEORY-RESEARCH-DEVELOPMENT-PRACTICE CYCLE

Theory, research, development, and practice together compose a vital cycle that allows ideas to be progressively refined as they evolve from concepts to practices and from practices to concepts. The theory-research-development-practice cycle illustrates the systematic application of inquiry methods working to advance the knowledge used by both organizational researchers and practitioners (see Swanson, 1997).

Although we find no historical evidence in the philosophy of science that an a priori linkage among theory, research, development, and practice was ever established, a relationship among these elements has emerged within and across professional disciplines. The call to inform practice with theory, research, and development has come relatively recently in such fields as human resource development and management (Passmore, 1990; Torraco, 1994; Swanson, 1997; Van de Ven, 2002; E. O. Wilson, 1998; W. O. Wilson, 1998). Other fields of study, such as medicine, have had a longer tradition of pursuing research, development, practice, and theory in ways that are mutually beneficial to each element.

However, there are those who caution us in constructing the relationships among research, development, practice, and theory. In offering the notion of a scientific *paradigm*, Kuhn (1970) compelled philosophers and researchers to rethink the assumptions underlying the scientific method and paved the way for alternative, postpositivistic approaches to research in the behavioral sciences. Ethnography and naturalistic inquiry allow theory to *emerge from data derived from practice and experience*; theory does not necessarily precede research, as theory can be generated through it. The model of theory, research, development, and practice for applied disciplines embraces these cautions (see Figure 1.1).

The cyclical model brings theory, research, development, and practice together in the same forum for research in organizations. The union of these domains is itself an important purpose of the model. Two other purposes also exist. First, each of the four domains makes a necessary contribution to effective practices in organizations. There is no presumption about the importance to the profession of contributions from practice versus theory. The model demonstrates the need for *all* domains to inform each other in order to enrich the profession as a whole. Second, exchange among the domains is multidirectional. Any of the

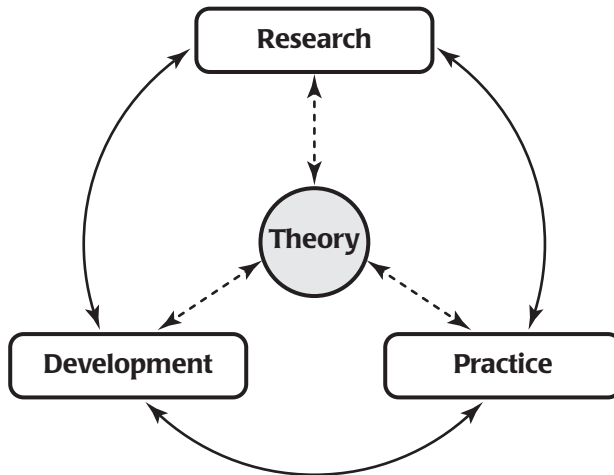


Figure 1.1 Theory-Research-Development-Practice Cycle

Source: R. A. Swanson (1997), "HRD Research: Don't Go to Work without It," in R. A. Swanson & E. F. Holton III (Eds.), *Human Resource Development Research Handbook* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler), pp. 3–20.

domains can serve as an appropriate starting point for proceeding through the cycle. Improvements in the profession can occur whether one begins with theory, research, development, or practice. The multidirectional flow of the model is examined next.

The process of working through the theory-research-development-practice cycle demonstrates how any of the four domains can be used as a starting point for knowledge generation. As one starting point of the cycle, *research* is undertaken to expand our professional knowledge base and frequently yields recommendations for the development of new systems or the improvement of practice. This link from research to *practice* is illustrated by influential research that has yielded innovative models of job design, work motivation, performance analysis, organizational change, and other products of research that have led directly to improvements in the profession.

Research can also proceed along the cycle to produce *theory*. Theory building is an important function of research that will be addressed in a later chapter. Although applied disciplines focused on organizations have benefited from a rich foundation of theories, many having originated in related fields of study. Additional theories are needed for greater understanding of a wide range of human and organizational phenomena. Thus, research serves a dual role in advancing organizational knowledge. Research provides knowledge that can be directly applied to the improvement of practice, and it is used to develop core theories.

Organizational *development* efforts offer a unique opportunity to enter the cycle. The demands of practice and the need for fundamental change establish

the conditions for the creation of fundamentally new organizational models and methods. An organization intervention is viewed as a subsystem within a larger system. The subsystem and system influence one another to the point that innovative and practical new developments often become bold starting points of activity and inquiry.

Illustrations of development efforts that have stimulated advances in the profession (theory, research, and practice) have come from large-scale change efforts, military training challenges, global economy issues facing multinational corporations, and the introduction of new information technologies. In this realm of research, a rigorous development process that embraces the organization's quality requirements is as important, or more important, than the evaluation of the effectiveness of the end product. For example, Sayre's (1990) research on the development and evaluation of a computer-based system for managing the design and pilot testing of interactive videos necessarily invested much more effort in development than in summative evaluation.

When starting with practice, there is no shortage of problems and challenges facing functioning organizations. These challenges provide an inexhaustible source of researchable problems. Proceeding from practice to research or practice to development along the cycle traces the familiar path between the problems that continuously arise in organizations and the research and development efforts they stimulate. For example, research is often stimulated by the need for organizations to improve core processes and their effectiveness. New methods, new process techniques, and alternative providers of services are just some of the re-occurring practice options. Other problems occur when new technical systems are acquired before personnel have the expertise to use them. Research continues to identify effective ways of developing the expertise to take advantage of emerging technologies. Scores of other practical research projects are undertaken to address pressing problems of practice.

Each of the domains of the theory-research-development-practice cycle serves to advance research in organizations. Each can be a catalyst to inquiry and a source of verification.

The cycle frequently starts with theory when it is used to guide and inform the processes of research, development, or practice. The variables and relationships to be considered are identified by reviewing the literature, which includes relevant theory. For example, if we wish to examine the influence of recent changes in work design on work motivation, we might start with existing theories of work motivation and identify variables from these theories that are relevant to our question. In the realm of work analysis, Torraco (1994) challenged this large area of professional activity as being highly researched but essentially atheoretical given the contemporary conditions under which organizations may function.

In summary, the process of knowledge generation can begin at any point along the theory-research-development-practice cycle, and flow along the cycle is multidirectional. The researcher or practitioner can start at any point and

proceed in any direction. Thus, each of the cycle's domains both *informs* and *is informed by* each of the other domains.

This continuum provides a context for theory that helps explain why theory has so many important roles. Whether one is an organizational researcher or practitioner, theory serves several roles that can greatly enhance the effectiveness of our work.

CONCLUSION

As human-made entities, organizations engage all kinds of human beings. No wonder organizations and the functioning of human beings in relation to organizations are of such great interest to so many fields of applied endeavor. All forms of research and all forms of researchers are needed to take on the challenge. The purpose of this book is to provide the basic principles and methods needed to take up this challenge.

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