

Grounding the Research Phenomenon
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As the guest editors state, “Problem-driven research (PDR) is problem-oriented research that focuses on capturing, documenting, and conceptualizing organizational and managerial phenomena of interest in order to facilitate knowledge creation and advancement” (Schwarz & Stensaker, 2016). A research phenomenon can be any problem, issue, or topic that is chosen as the subject of an investigation. The phenomenon may originate in either the practical world of affairs, a theoretical discipline, or a personal experience or insight. It may be perceived to represent an unsatisfying circumstance, a promising opportunity, a breakdown or anomaly in expected arrangements, or simply a topic of interest. However one construes the phenomenon, researchers tend to encounter four common difficulties in grounding and diagnosing phenomena. After reviewing these common difficulties, this essay suggests some ways for addressing these difficulties.

First, a key challenge in situating a phenomenon is deciding what perspective to take in terms of what persons or stakeholder groups will be served by the research, and to describe the phenomenon from the perspectives of those relevant parties. Implicitly or explicitly, all research is undertaken in service of someone—the researcher, a funding agency, practitioners, academics, a profession, etc. Phenomena do not exist objectively ‘out there;’ they are uniquely perceived and framed by different people. A phenomenon may be viewed as a central problem to some, an insignificant issue to some, and blissfully ignored by others. As a result, knowing whose perspective is being addressed and engaging them in describing the phenomenon is necessary to frame the focus, level, and scope of a research study.

Second, researchers—like other human beings—have limited capabilities in handling complexity. They often use shortcuts or heuristics that produce biased results. Needless to say, solving the ‘wrong’ problem with the ‘right’ methods, or what J. Tuckey referred to as a Type III error, is costly, demoralizing, and all-too-familiar (Volkema, 1995; Buyukdamgaci, 2003). Unfortunately, description and

diagnosis of a phenomenon are often rushed or taken for granted. Introductions in top academic journals' papers often assert a lack of knowledge or research on the phenomenon without any justification or grounding. Moreover, these assertions are stated in a negative rather than a positive frame, i.e., in terms of what we don't know (which is indefinite) rather than what we need to know (which is positive and provides direction). As a result, important dimensions often go unrecognized and opportunities to advance knowledge about the phenomenon are missed or misdirected (Volkema, 1983).

A third difficulty is that the issues that motivate a study are sometimes stated as imaginary pseudo-problems that lack empirical grounding. Too many social science studies suffer from elaborating theories that are often based on insufficient diagnosis of a phenomenon and its context. As a consequence, theory and research tend to be grounded in myths and superstitions. Those who generalize from concrete experiences or particulars with a phenomenon can answer the questions, *For example? From whose point of view? What is that point of view?* Engaging people who experience and know the phenomenon is necessary to answer these questions. Lacking answers to these questions often leads to unfounded generalizations.

Merton points out that often in science, as in everyday life, 'explanations are provided of matters that are not and never were' (Merton, 1987, p. 21). In legal proceedings, establishing the case is mandatory for pursuing it. Merton (1987) cautioned that an important first element in the practice of science is 'establishing the phenomenon.' Evidence and arguments should clearly indicate that the phenomenon is enough of a regularity to require and allow explanation. In this way 'pseudo facts that induce pseudo problems are avoided' (Hernes, 1989, p. 125).

A fourth difficulty is that even when phenomena are grounded in reality, their diagnosis may not be linked to the general case of which they are a part. As a result, analysis of the particular case observed does not lead to creative theory that advances understanding of the more general case. Bruner (1973) points out that a theory or model is a generic representation of the critical characteristics of an observed

phenomenon. For Bruner, grounding theories in reality requires going beyond the information given so that the phenomenon is formulated to have applicability beyond the situation in which it is observed.

This paper discusses some ways for dealing with these four common difficulties in grounding phenomenon. They include information-gathering activities drawing on personal experiences and direct observations of the phenomenon, as well as engaging with people who experience the phenomenon through casual conversations, interviews, or in group meetings. Reviewing the literature to determine the scope, prevalence, and context of the phenomenon is also needed.

The purpose of these activities is for the researcher to become sufficiently familiar with the domain of a phenomenon so as to be able to answer the journalist's basic questions of *who*, *what*, *where*, *when*, *why*, and *how*. As exemplified in the first two paragraphs of most newspaper feature stories, grounding the phenomenon requires both particular and general answers to these questions. The first paragraph typically provides *particular* answers to the journalist's questions with up-close and personal descriptions of the phenomenon based on first-hand observations of a specific case or two. Particular answers provide concrete and vivid details. The second paragraph provides *general* answers to the journalist's questions by showing that the particular case is not unique: instead it is an instance of a much larger or pervasive phenomenon. Typically the general answers are based on empirical evidence obtained from literature reviews of prior research on the phenomenon.

In Van de Ven (2007, p. 78) I use the example of Joe Blow for grounding a phenomenon up-close.

Each week for the past six months (*when*), Joe Blow, a 45-year old machinist (*who*) has been seeing his psychiatrist for moods of depression (*what*) that have become worse since he was laid off from his job (*why*) that he held for 20 years at AMC Engineering located in this industrial Midwest town (*where*).

The second paragraph provides general answers to the journalist's questions about the pervasiveness and context of the phenomenon. It might read as follows.

Joe Blow is not alone. A study by University researchers (Wanberg, Glomb, Song, & Rosol, 2005) reported that there were 8,349 mass layoffs in 2001 (*when*) in the U.S. (*where*), which led to 1.7 million individuals losing their jobs (*who*). Researchers are finding that job loss has a negative influence on most every indicator of mental and physical health. For example, studies demonstrate that job loss is associated with increased anxiety, depression, sleeping problems, alcohol disorders, divorce, and child abuse (e.g., Dooley, Fielding, & Levi, 1996) (*why*). Joe Blow and millions like him (*who*) are posing a major question of what to do about the problems associated with job layoffs?

When beginning a study researchers are seldom sufficiently familiar with the phenomenon and unable to answer the journalist's questions in particular and in general. This is because grounding a phenomenon is not a solitary exercise; instead, it is a collective achievement. Grounding the phenomenon requires the researcher to step outside him or herself, and to be open to and informed by the interpretations of others about the phenomenon. As Bruner (1986, p. 133) states, 'Reflection and "distancing" are crucial aspects of achieving a sense of the range of possible stances—a metacognitive step of huge importance.' Most phenomena tend to exist in a 'buzzing, blooming, and confusing' reality. The world is too rich and multi-layered to be captured adequately by any single person. It requires a researcher to be reflexive (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000) and recognize his/her perspective, and to obtain and coordinate perspectives of other key stakeholders in order to identify robust features of the phenomenon being studied.

Pasteur stated that "chance favors the prepared mind." The chance of creative invention increases when scholars ground the phenomenon up close and from afar through careful observation and data collection as just discussed. These data provide the raw materials for diagnosing the phenomenon.

Diagnosis entails a disciplined, yet open-minded, application of data and theories in order to ascertain what research questions about a phenomenon merit investigation. A useful exercise for doing this is to map the conceptual space of a phenomenon or problem, as illustrated in Figure 1. Typically, this conceptual space includes recognition of what is already known in the research literature about the phenomenon, and hence may not merit further study (unless a replication study is important). The bottom half of Figure 1 illustrates unknown aspects of the phenomenon. For most problems or phenomena, some aspects may be scientifically unknown but not worth researching because the minds of stakeholders are closed or have been “made up” for cultural, religious, political, or undiscussable reasons. Still other aspects of the problem domain may be so totally unknown or ambiguous that they are not researchable. The “sweet spot” exists in the intermediate space of researchable questions. This space typically includes many important and researchable questions. Figure 1 illustrates three questions that might be studied in temporal sequence, when findings from a current study of question 1 can inform the next study of question 2, and a possible future study of question 3. The choice of which question to study may also be influenced by pragmatic considerations of when needed resources, data access, and capabilities become available to researchers. In general, this kind of temporal mapping of questions provides a constructive way to diagnose and choose a research program that consists of research findings on a series of cumulative questions, without losing sight of how these findings may also inform other domains in the problem or phenomenon space. Of course, this conceptual space of the phenomenon changes over time as a result of new research findings, theoretical advances, and changing social norms and priorities.

Conclusion

Problem-driven and theory-driven research are inextricably connected when grounding the research phenomenon. Some years ago, the *Journal of Management Inquiry* featured a debate between Paul Lawrence and Karl Weick about the merits and demerits of undertaking problem-driven or theory-driven research. This debate included the question of who should be the primary user or client of management research. Herbert Simon (1976) argued that research in a professional school should both

advance knowledge in a scientific discipline and enlighten the practice of management. The arguments advanced by Lawrence and Weick reflect the differing viewpoints of scholars engaged in applied and basic research. Weick viewed problem formulation from a theoretical perspective, while Lawrence examined it as a real-world phenomenon.

Paul Lawrence (1992, p. 140) argued that significant behavioral science originates from phenomenon or problem-oriented research rather than from theory-oriented research. He warned that behavioral scientists make a big mistake if they do not ask users and research participants what needs to be studied and how theories and knowledge may be inadequate.

Weick (1992) argued the case for theory-driven research. All theories are about practice and practicality, and the trick is to discover those settings and conditions under which they hold true. He discussed three criteria for selecting research problems: knowledge (choose problems in areas where you have a thorough understanding), dissatisfaction (choose problems that reflect a healthy, active opposition to existing knowledge and methodology), and generalizability (choose variables and situations that are universal and common rather than unique and rare). A theory-based approach is a continuing effort to find those contexts where a theory holds true (Weick, 1992, p. 172).

This formulation emphasizes the process of diagnosis as discussed here. The particular problem is a pretext to look for a pattern that is more generalizable (i.e., more abstract) something that goes beyond the information given (Bruner, 1973) and applies to people in general (Meehl, 1995); it is an exercise in sense-making. In problem-focused work, the particular is a context rather than a pretext, and consists of a self-contained story, tied together by its own logic. Different logics will generate different studies, and different stories will suggest different remedies (Weick, 1992, p. 172).

Murray Davis (1971/1986) provided an insightful synthesis to this debate by examining what makes research interesting and classic. He argues that the better we know our audience, the better we can frame or position our research problem and question to the prevailing assumptions of the readers and

users of our research. Understanding the assumptions of our research audience increases the likelihood that our findings are used to advance both theory and practice.

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Figure 1. Diagnosing a Problem Space

