To wear many different hats: how do scholar-practitioners span boundaries between academia and practice?

Scholar-practitioners are those individuals who succeed in spanning the boundaries between academia and practice. **Guillaume Carton** *and* **Paula Ungureanu***'s research sought to better understand scholar-practitioners; the multiple roles they perform across each world, the perceived synergies and tensions, and the strategies employed to manage them. A key tension exists between institutional pressures for hyper-specialisation and scholar-practitioners' personal aspirations that their multiple roles will be integrated in a more legitimate professional structure.*

In many fields across the social, natural, formal, and applied sciences, the relationship between theory and practice has been a matter of great debate (see here and here, for example). An increasing number of contributions either lament the "gaps" between academic research and societal practice or use tools to demonstrate the "bridges" between them. This tendency has shaped a debate that runs in circles, and lacks efforts at integration. The theory-practice debate has been particularly fervid in the field of management, with many studies striving to understand why management scholars and practitioners organise around distinct systems of expertise (i.e. rigorous vs. relevant knowledge). While some have argued that these differences are such that the research-practice divide is effectively unbridgeable, others have suggested that successful exchanges occur on a daily basis thanks to individuals who dedicate their careers to spanning these boundaries. Yet few studies have investigated if and how these research-practice boundary spanners succeed where others do not.

The case of scholar-practitioners

Our study (recently published in the *Journal of Management Inquiry* and also available on ResearchGate) takes the specific case of the scholar-practitioner to investigate the challenges of reconciling scientific and managerial logics in day-to-day settings. Scholar-practitioners are professionals who keep one foot in each of the worlds of management academia and managerial practice. To understand their multiple roles in these worlds, the perceived synergies and tensions, and the strategies employed to manage them, we conducted in-depth interviews with a select group of renowned and emergent scholar-practitioners across Europe and North America.

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Spanning research-practice boundaries – a blessing or a curse?

One may think that getting a PhD or a DBA after experience in industry, or working part-time as a consultant throughout academic tenure, automatically affords one the status of boundary spanner, with all the attendant benefits (such as, for instance, the knowledge advantages of a financial broker or the reputation of a cultural mediator). However, our study shows that scholar-practitioners have a hard time defining who they are, professionally and personally, as they are caught in between institutional pressures for role separation, on one hand, and their personal desire for role integration, on the other. For instance, scholar-practitioners have difficulties explaining what they do day-to-day, or conveying the knowledge and skills their role requires. They are situated "betwixt and between", in an intermediate, ambiguous, temporary position in which they span multiple cultures such that they contribute to all and to none of them at the same time. As such, they fight to carve out a place for themselves in between two competing fields, amidst scepticism, suspicion, and parochial pressures to conform.

Professional pressures and the role separation-integration dilemma

Our findings reveal tensions between three types of professional roles – teaching, research, and practical application – when these must be enacted simultaneously or at short intervals of time. One important issue seems to be the pressure for hyper-specialisation. For instance, all our scholar-practitioner interviewees lamented how academia requires full dedication to activities such as conducting high-quality research or publishing in top-tier academic journals. Similarly, they argued that business consultants are increasingly required to commit full-time to client-centred activities and that teaching standards are increasingly set by those who specialise exclusively in classroom training. The institutional pressures for role separation clash with their personal aspiration that one day their multiple roles will be integrated in a more governable and legitimate professional structure.

Our model shows that scholar-practitioners operate on a continuum, with pressures for role segmentation (as determined by the institutional environment) at one end, and pressures for role integration (as driven by their own professional aspirations) at the other.

Role management strategies and associated knowledge consequences

Along the separation-integration continuum, scholar-practitioners deploy three types of strategies to deal with teaching, research, and practical application roles.
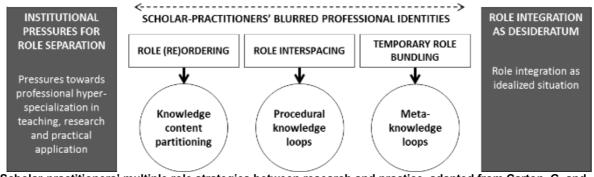

Figure 1: Scholar-practitioners' multiple role strategies between research and practice, adapted from Carton, G. and Ungureanu, P. (2017) "Bridging the Research–Practice Divide", *Journal of Management Inquiry.*

Interestingly, each strategy facilitates different knowledge spillovers, or overlaps, across roles:

1. *Role (re)ordering* – creating a role portfolio such that each role has an assigned priority which can be reordered as often as necessary. In this strategy, the knowledge associated to each role is partitioned ("know what" and "know how" are kept separate).
2. *Role interspacing* – neatly distinguishing one's role portfolio from those of other professions. Through this strategy, individuals transfer procedural knowledge from one role to another; particularly competences

("asking how") and experiences ("showing how").

3. *Temporary role bundling* – used to create extensive social networks across academia and practice. Individuals who adopt this strategy transfer knowledge across roles through a brokering loop ("knowing who knows what" and "who knows who") and a reliability loop ("showing how one knows").

Interestingly, our study points to a temporal pattern: the more experienced scholar-practitioners become, the more it seems they feel ready to move away from segmentation strategies (i.e. role (re)ordering) and towards integration strategies (i.e. temporary role bundling).

What's next and how to go about it

We suggest these strategies may be applicable to boundary spanners more generally but also to traditional academics and practitioners. However, our study suggests it is the separation-integration pressure that pushes scholar-practitioners to manage their multiple roles in the way they do. We propose that one way to bridge the academia-practice gap is to encourage traditional scholars and practitioners to perceive themselves as fragile but at the same time resourceful boundary spanners. Individuals who feel they must work hard to prove to others that they can build a self-standing professional identity might be more creative and persistent in boundary-spanning activities. By contrast, individuals who are already firmly established in their main community of reference may feel less pressure to show the world who they are.

It is also important to understand why more experienced boundary spanners have the confidence to engage in more difficult role management strategies, rather than choosing to fit into existing patterns. This finding can have important consequences for establishing motivational strategies for boundary spanners at different stages of their career, as well as assisting them in their struggles to maintain a delicate equilibrium between pressures for separation and integration.

This blog post is based on the authors' article, "[Bridging the Research–Practice Divide: A Study of Scholar-Practitioners' Multiple Role Management Strategies and Knowledge Spillovers Across Roles](#)", published in the Journal of Management Inquiry (DOI: 10.1177/1056492617696890).

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