

Andrew H. Van de Ven. *Engaged Scholarship: A Guide for Organizational and Social Research*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

The Bridging Scholarship

Review by Lorilee R. Sandmann and Courtney H. Thornton

“Scholarship means something more than research, and engagement is the means for scholarship to flourish.”
(*Van de Ven 2007, 9*).

In *Engaged Scholarship: A Guide for Organizational and Social Research*, Professor Andrew H. Van de Ven, the Vernon H. Heath Professor of Organizational Innovation and Change at the University of Minnesota’s Carlson School of Management, presents the result of a professional lifetime of studying complex, contemporary social problems and of teaching social science research. His interest and experience with engaged scholarship began in the late 1960s when he worked with his mentor, Andre Delbecq, on developing the Nominal Group Technique, a group brainstorming method now used worldwide. He starts by acknowledging that the scope of today’s complex problems exceeds what any individual scholar’s study can encompass and by highlighting the gap between research and practice in studying and addressing these social problems.

Building on earlier work (*Van de Ven and Johnson 2006*), Van de Ven discusses three ways to frame this gap: a knowledge transfer problem, science and practice as distinct forms of knowledge, and a knowledge production problem. In the knowledge transfer discussion, he draws on Pettigrew (2001):

The action steps to resolve the old dichotomy of theory and practice were often portrayed with the minimalist request for researchers to engage with practitioners through more accessible dissemination. But dissemination is too late if the wrong questions have been asked. A wider and deeper form of engagement between researchers and practitioners is needed in the co-production of knowledge. (S67)

Further, Van de Ven discusses the ontology and epistemology of theory and practice, acknowledging the implications of their differing context, process, and purpose. Rather than press academics

to put their theories into practice and practitioners to put their practice into theory, which involves transfer and translation of one into the other, he maintains that science and practice provide “complementary insights for understanding reality” (p. 4). Once different perspectives and kinds of knowledge are recognized as “partial, incomplete, and involving inherent bias with respect to any complex problem . . . then it is easy to see the need for a pluralistic approach to knowledge co-production among scholars and practitioners” (p. 4). This logic leads to the assessment of the theory-practice gap as a knowledge production problem (see Simon 1976; Gibbons et al. 1994; Van de Ven and Johnson 2006, among others). Scholars address this by building a bridge into the practitioners’ world and cocreating knowledge, using engaged scholarship to produce rigor and relevant science while informing practice and policy.

Van de Ven defines engaged scholarship as “a participative form of research for obtaining the different perspectives of key stakeholders (researchers, users, clients, sponsors, and practitioners) in studying complex problems” (p. 9). In many ways, this definition embraces ideas of scholars such as Holland (2005), who define engaged scholarship as highly collaborative and thus incorporating multiple perspectives and approaches to difficult problems. Engaged scholarship, according to Van de Ven, is also an identity reflecting how scholars view their relationship with their communities and is a relation involving negotiation, mutual respect, and collaboration as a learning community. He presents a research process model involving both researchers and practitioner stakeholders in understanding the research problem and questions.

Diamond Model of Engaged Scholarship

It is important to acknowledge at the outset that Van de Ven addresses the work of individual engaged scholars rather than the institutional level of commitment and effort. The heart of his text is a diamond-shaped model for engaged research, its four sides comprising problem formulation, theory building, research design, and problem solving. The model is not meant to depict a prescribed order; rather, Van de Ven argues that the researcher can perform these four activities in any sequence during research efforts.

This work proposes crossing the bridge into “engaged” inquiry chiefly by grounding scholarship in the reality of the practitioner through the problem formulation process. Chapter 3 centers on the formulation of a research problem through situating, grounding, diagnosing, and resolving. Identifying the end users of the research and understanding their reality makes it possible to situate and

ground a research problem. This information is then used in problem diagnosis: existing theories and models are applied to further contextualize the issue. This process may lead to the generation of a number of research problems; the researcher should then involve stakeholders in a process to reduce bias and reach a decision on which question to pursue. Van de Ven's discussion of several group decision-making processes at the end of this chapter is distinctive; he rarely again gives such concrete examples illustrating how to accomplish the engaged work that he advocates.

Another part of the engaged scholarship diamond, covered in chapter 4, is theory-building activities: creation, elaboration, and justification. This chapter focuses heavily on the concept of abductive reasoning: identifying anomalies in organizational life (from his field of management studies) and formulating conjectures to bring them into the realm of common understanding so that one can construct a theory and evaluate its appropriateness. Van de Ven encourages researchers to consider these observed anomalies along with organizational actors from varying perspectives. This engaged approach increases the number of plausible explanations for the anomaly and strengthens the resultant theory. Outside this mention of the involvement of organizational actors, this chapter chiefly delves into the logic and reasoning processes involved in theory creation to the neglect of the social processes necessary in efforts of engaged theory building.

Aspects of research design and the use of research models, which "mediate between theories and the world" (p. 144), are developed in chapters 5–7. Van de Ven introduces the distinction between variance models ("what causes what") and process models ("how things develop and change over time") (p. 146). The description of variance and process studies design includes considerations of experiment design and analysis available in any textbook on research methods. Van de Ven does briefly acknowledge in these chapters that both types of studies must produce results relevant to the stakeholders and should include other research colleagues and practitioners in the analysis process. However, by organizing these chapters around common methodological considerations, he sacrifices an opportunity to focus on a much needed discussion of engagement in research design. Such a discussion would make a truly unique contribution to the conversation on engaged scholarship.

The diamond model is completed by the discussion of problem solving. Here Van de Ven again focuses on the social processes of engaged research through his commentaries on communication

across knowledge boundaries and the political dimensions of information translation and usefulness.

Forms of Engaged Scholarship

Beyond the diamond model of engaged scholarship, Van de Ven posits that there are four forms of legitimate and needed engaged scholarship: informed basic research, collaborative research, design evaluation, and action and intervention research. The form undertaken depends on the “purpose, the perspective, and complexity of the study being undertaken” (p. 268). The purpose may be to describe, explain, design or evaluate, or control or intervene in a particular situation. Perspectives of the outsider (detached, impartial onlooker) and insider (participant, immersed in experience) generate different types of knowledge.

In addition, the complexity of the study may cause variations in practice. Complexity includes issues of size, scale, and scope of the investigation. While presenting these approaches as a typology, Van de Ven is sufficiently grounded in practice to allow that there are “many variations and overlaps among these forms of engaged scholarship” (p. 283). Through this typology it is also clear that Van de Ven’s conceptualization of engaged scholarship includes a continuum of stakeholder engagement. Studying complex problems is done *with* practitioners and other stakeholders in some approaches, and in others it is done *to* stakeholders. These latter approaches appear somewhat inconsistent with the norms and values of engagement.

Being steeped in research theory and practice, Van de Ven concludes by acknowledging difficulties that engaged scholarship presents in making “penetrating and insightful advances to science and practice” (p. 284). A particularly insightful discussion focuses on the expected lack of convergence in triangulated data that engaged scholarship may yield and how to derive meaning from data under those conditions. Since politics and partisanship are involved in any form of engaged scholarship, Van de Ven challenges engaged scholars to be overtly reflective about whose views and interests are being served, with particular clarity about one’s own as a researcher. Finally, he observes that social science is an intensely social process requiring time for developing and negotiating the research relationship with stakeholders, as well as for work in the field.

Bridging Challenges and Opportunities

Van de Ven, as a scholar, brings deep considered thought and tested experience from the study and discipline of management into

the scholarship of engagement dialogue. Here management science joins history, sociology, health sciences, and other disciplines in addressing what engagement, particularly scholarly engagement, means in the respective disciplines. We have much to learn from each other, and only when the scholarship of engagement is interpreted within the context and core of the disciplines will it be further embedded within faculty preparation, practice, and rewards systems (*Sandmann, Saltmarsh, and O'Meara 2008*).

This book is foregrounded in a discussion about science and theory that presents an accessible and legitimate point of entry for traditional scholars while deepening all readers' understanding of these topics. This discussion offers one of the most thorough explanations to date differentiating the conceptualization of scholarly engagement from the more general movement and conceptualization of civic or community engagement (*Sandmann 2008*). This broader movement seems to be ready for such good conceptual thinking and generalizable operational models. Because it goes beyond descriptive case studies, Van de Ven's work has the potential to increase the rigor and relevancy of all collaborative efforts in addressing complex social problems.

While the strength of this book is its discussion of science and theory, it is regrettably light on the philosophies and description of practitioners' knowledge. What is the knowledge of practice? What does knowledge look like in practice? Who are the practical scholars? These absences reflect the broader shortcomings of this book. It is intended for graduate students and other scholars of management, research, and now of engagement. Ironically, while one of its basic tenets is creating a bridge to practitioners, it is not a book for practitioners. In fact, it lacks the voices of various practitioners and stakeholders whom the author invokes as partners in engaged scholarship, leaving this ostensible bridge between scholars and practitioners sadly incomplete. Similarly missing in Van de Ven's approach are key aspects of engagement: reciprocity as a fundamental principle in all aspects of the diamond model and the ideas of interdisciplinarity and long-term, sustainable relationships. Absence of the latter may reflect the text's intended use for teaching professional school graduate students whose outlook on their work may be neither long-term nor interdisciplinary.

Finally, while Van de Ven draws from Carlile's (2004) very insightful framework in managing knowledge across boundaries through transferring, translating, and transforming it, his work would have been improved by discussing the potential transformation not only of the knowledge but of the scholar and the practitioner manager involved in engaged scholarship.

These limitations aside, in attempting to address the theory-practice gap in management and social science research, this volume, with its distinct definition as a bridging scholarship, as well as its framework and forms for doing such scholarship, advances both the theory and practice of engaged scholarship so that engagement can be “the means for scholarship to flourish” (p. 9).

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