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Engaged Participant Observation: An Integrative Approach to Qualitative Field Research for Practitioner-Scholars

Daniel Robey
Georgia State University, danrobey@gsu.edu

Wallace T.F Taylor
Georgia State Universtity, wallacethor.taylor@gmail.com

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Daniel Robey
Georgia State University

Wallace Taylor
Georgia State University

ABSTRACT

Participant observation is an appropriate research method for engaged practitioner–scholars seeking in-depth insights available from qualitative field research. Conventional approaches to participant observation include ethnography and action research. However, conventional approaches as they originally were developed assumed that the roles of practitioner and scholar are separate. We propose a new approach, *engaged participant observation*, that recognizes the integration of research and practice roles and strives for both scientific and pragmatic rigor. We illustrate the application of engaged participant observation, and its particular tensions, based on the completed executive doctoral dissertation conducted by the second author and supervised by the first author. We address the tensions associated with engaged participant observation, including issues of identity, potentially biased interpretation, ethical conduct, and publication. Our analysis compares these issues across three participant observation methods and provides pragmatic guidance for qualitative field research in organizations in which the researcher is an engaged participant.

EDITORIAL NOTE

In their article "Engaged Participant Observation: An Integrative Approach to Qualitative Field Research for Practitioner-Scholars," Dan Robey and Wallace Taylor address an important epistemological and practice question of research inquiry carried out by a practicing management scholar. The key challenge they discuss is that nearly all practice-oriented qualitative and intimate 'practice close' inquiries assume a separate and distinct role for the researcher and the manager being studied. There are separate minds and bodies originating from different social worlds where the scholar seeks to understand and account for the behaviors of the practitioner while the practitioner is the recipient of the knowledge. They are bound together with a shared goal of improving the situation and knowledge that underlies action. As the authors note, this separation of roles and concerns cuts across all dominating forms of qualitative inquiry starting from ethnographies and ending in recent forms of engaged management scholarship or action research. But what if the roles are contextual and fluid and the hat of the scholar and the hat of the practitioner are changed from one context to another? How should we think of validity and objectivity; how should we handle ethical issues of collecting and analyzing data; and how can we keep these roles in tension in a productive dialectic? The article does not fully address all the concerns related to this topic. We are left with a host of lingering issues. The authors pose boldly and clearly the challenges of practitioner scholar inquiry and engage the reader with a thoughtful argument around what the key tensions are and how to become aware of them and handle them productively in the heat of inquiry. The result is an intriguing opening into the alternative practice oriented epistemologies that characterize practitioner scholarship. The article is a must read to all students and faculty engaged in mentoring and guiding students participating in practitioner oriented doctoral programs as it clearly poses the issues we are all dealing with daily. I hope you enjoy it as much as I did it while working with the authors to bring the article into the daylight.

INTRODUCTION

Practitioner scholarship promises to accelerate the practical application of research findings by combining the separate roles of practitioner and scholar, thus producing "practitioner–scholars." With their proximity to real-world problems and their research skills, practitioner–scholars can bridge the divide between academic research and the problems situated in practice settings. Ideally, practitioner–scholars would generate research findings that meet the rigorous scientific standards for theory and methodology while simultaneously generating problem solutions that can be implemented. The metaphors of pipelines, bridges, and partnerships that commonly are used to convey closure of the gap between research and practice can therefore be set aside as scholarship and practice become integrated.

Among the challenges of a more integrated approach to management scholarship is the need to adapt traditional research methods to the special requirements of the practitioner–scholar. We focus in this essay on the methodology of participant observation (Jorgensen, 1989), which is highly valued as an approach to generating qualitative field research data. Participant observation involves the use of direct observations by researchers who participate in various ways in the activities they are studying. Although many research methods might be imported intact from traditional academic practice (e.g., surveys, experiments, simulations, data mining), traditional participant observation might not be directly appropriable. Standard approaches involving participant observation include ethnography and action research, each of which immerses researchers deeply into problem contexts. Deep immersion, in turn, generates potential role conflicts and tensions that can compromise the scientific validity of a field study. Both ethnography and action research offer guidance for resolving the tensions between research and practice, allowing participant observers to mitigate the problems posed by conflicting roles. These methodological guidelines, although useful to researchers who are *not* practitioners, are not appropriate for the emerging model of practitioner scholarship. We therefore offer a modified approach, engaged participant observation, which is more suitable to the needs of the practitioner–scholar.

Our approach calls on practitioner–scholars to exercise two kinds of rigor in their work. *Scientific rigor* is well established in the many research methodologies that might be applied systematically to generate valid knowledge. Although this type of rigor is often pitted against relevance to practice, we argue that *pragmatic rigor* should also be applied as a complement to scientific rigor. Pragmatic rigor refers to the criteria used in judging the relevance of research to practical problems. The tensions between scientific and pragmatic rigor are most often experienced when practitioner–scholars seek to publish their work. We recommend closer attention to criteria for evaluating the pragmatic rigor of studies so that publication decisions can be based on the achievement of both scientific and pragmatic criteria (Robey & Markus, 1998).

We organize our arguments as follows. First, we assess the applicability of two established methods used in qualitative field research: ethnography and action research. Neither of these is deemed appropriate for the practitioner–scholar, leaving a void in the methodological toolkit of practitioner–scholars seeking to conduct participant observation studies in their own work settings. Second, we describe engaged participant observation and discuss four of its challenges: identity and relationship work, potentially biased interpretation, ethical conduct, and dissemination through publication. These challenges produced tensions in our personal experience with engaged participant observation (Taylor, 2015), which prompted efforts to resolve them. Third, we discuss the ways that tensions are managed across all three approaches (i.e., ethnography, action research, and engaged participant observation), including the need to address both scientific and pragmatic rigor in publications. We conclude with recommendations for the training of practitioner–scholars needing to acquire skills to navigate the new territory of practitioner scholarship in action.

TRADITIONAL PARTICIPANT ROLES IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH: ETHNOGRAPHY AND ACTION RESEARCH

Qualitative research methods are well suited to the needs of practitioner–scholars because they promote explanations of complex phenomena that are detailed, nuanced, and grounded in natural settings (Mason, 1996). Typical data sources include semi-structured interviews with participants, photographs of artifacts and work settings, video recordings of presentations, drawings generated by participants upon request from the researcher, archival documents and files, online sources, and the researcher's own impressions as a participant–observer (Mason, 1996). Qualitative research seems especially appropriate for the types of situations with which practitioner–scholars are most familiar: work settings where the aim is to conduct research to produce a workable solution to real problems. In such settings, the practitioner–scholar is positioned to rely extensively on observations and personal experiences gained as a participant. For this reason, participant observation can be a valuable means of complementing other sources of data. We next describe two traditional approaches to participant observation—ethnography and action research—and explain why they might *not* be suitable for practitioner scholarship.

Ethnography

Ethnography (literally, the writing of culture) originated in anthropology as an approach to studying cultures. Ethnography is a research method that relies on first-hand observations made by a researcher immersed over an extended period of time, typically in a culture with which he or she is unfamiliar (Agar, 1986). The ethnographer's goals are to understand the cultural context from the "native" point of view and to compose a "thick description" that reveals insights into the culture.

Classic ethnographies focused on indigenous non-Western cultures and were published in book form (e.g., Mead, 1954); some modern ethnographies conducted in work places follow this classic model with minor variations (e.g., Zuboff, 1988; Kunda, 2009; Leonardi, 2012). Workplace ethnographers also adapt their study reports to fit the format of refereed journal articles (e.g., Barley, 1986; Jin and Robey, 2008; Schultze and Orlikowski, 2004). Regardless of the format their written work takes, classic and modern ethnographers face similar issues in approaching their field research. As participant observers, they need to gain access, establish a role through identity work, and manage relationships with those already in the cultural setting.

Classic ethnography positions the researcher as an outsider—an alien to the culture being studied. As a "fish out of water," the ethnographer has the advantage of observing signs and symbols for the first time and refining his or her understanding of their meanings. Meanwhile, the native "fish in the water" might be unable to see normative behaviors in the same light as the ethnographer because he or she is too familiar with them. The ethnographer's journey begins at the point of entry as observer, progresses through a process of becoming a participant, and ends with an exit back to the role of observer and writer of the experience. This progression is illustrated in Figure 1.

Ethnographers often gain access as volunteers, students, interns, or some other quasi-official capacity. They normally (and ethically) disclose their dual roles as participant and researcher to gain access. For example, Jin worked as a paid intern in a Silicon Valley startup company (Jin and Robey, 2008), and Roy (1959) worked in a factory prior to his studies in sociology. After they are given access, ethnographers need to conduct identity work so that they gain acceptance and trust from members of the culture they study. For example, Barley donned a lab coat as a way of blending into the culture of radiology in the two hospitals he studied (Barley, 1990). This "costume" comfortably positioned him as a student who was studying the computerized axial tomography (CAT or CT) scanners introduced at that time.[1] Over time, ethnographers become familiar and welcome participants whose main risk is "going native" and compromising their other role of observer.

Ethnography has the advantage producing deep insights into concepts that otherwise might be oversimplified or taken for granted.[2] Ethnography also generates awareness of the dynamics of social change, which is relevant to practice. Despite the advantages, classic ethnography is not straightforwardly compatible with the situations of practitioner–scholars. Practitioners are already engaged with the culture and therefore do not enjoy the advantage of being alien observers. They

Figure 1: Continuum of Engagement over Time in Ethnographic Studies

Entry as Observer | Adoption of Participant Role | Exit as Observer

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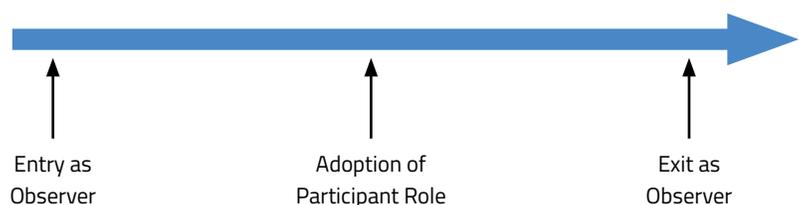
[1] Although Barley assumed the guise of a medical student, his studies were in the management of technology at Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

[2] For example, Prasad and Prasad (2000) studied employee resistance to changes in technology, unpacking the concept of resistance to reveal multiple layers of tactics used by employees in their routine work performance.

Figure 2: Observation in Engaged Participant Research

Entry as Participant   Adoption of Observer Role   Remain as Participant
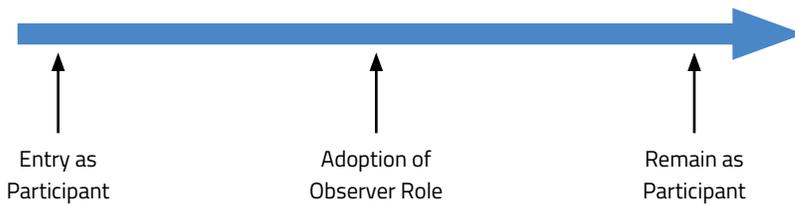
have little room to establish an identity that is different from the one they currently have, and they have no exit plan. Their progression is illustrated in Figure 2.

Action Research

Action research aims to contribute both to the practical concerns of people in a problematic situation and to the goals of social science through joint collaborations between researchers and practitioners (Rapoport 1970). These dual imperatives generate the fundamental tensions that distinguish action research from traditional academic research (McKay and Marshall, 2001; Chiasson et al., 2009). By insisting that both researcher interests and practitioner interests are accommodated, an action research project extends the customary limits of both research and practice. Practitioners who engage in action research might therefore become impatient for results before all data are analyzed; conversely, researchers might feel pressure to compromise data collection and analysis to produce actionable results sooner. Figure 3 illustrates the relationship between the dual imperatives of action research.

In action research, the roles of practitioner and researcher are usually considered to be separate. The goals of engaged scholarship (Van de Ven, 2007) are achieved through a partnership between practitioners and researchers. The partnership normally requires a formal contract to engage in joint problem-solving between a researcher and a client, and issues of sponsorship, ownership, and length of engagement are agreed on in advance. This arrangement allows practitioner clients to have the problem addressed, while researchers receive assurance that they can publish the results. The underlying assumption is that the client and researcher have different skills and incentives to execute the research, and the contract protects both sets of interests.

The action research process normally follows an iterative progression of cycles, as illustrated in Figure 4. Research results are used as the basis of planned interventions, and the effects of those interventions are then studied. Each problem-solving cycle leverages the results of prior interventions to refine later interventions (Susman and Evered, 1978). Throughout, the client and the researcher confer on the goals of the research, interpretation of the research results, and the planning of subsequent interventions. Practitioners thus gain the benefit of researchers' expertise in scientific methods, while researchers gain access to real problems worth studying and to data for publication.

The advantages of action research include greater relevance of research to practice, and opportunities for academic–industry sponsorship of research. Despite these advantages, action research in its most common forms is *not* a feasible model for engaged participant observation studies conducted by practitioner–scholars. The basic arrangement between client and researcher perpetuates the dual-role assumption characteristic of earlier efforts to bring researchers and practitioners together (e.g., Van de Ven, 2007). This duality precludes the integration of the practitioner and researcher roles.
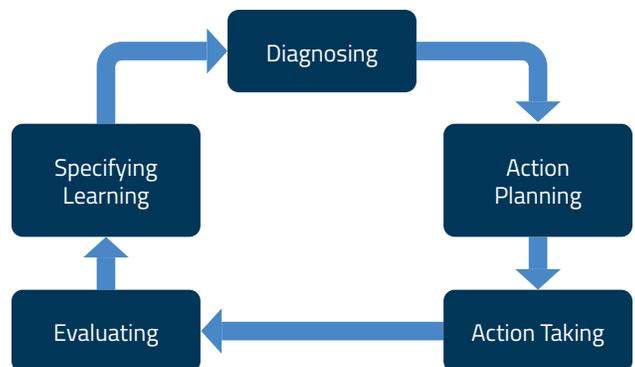
Given a desire to collect data using participant observation, practitioner–scholars

Figure 3: Action Research Cycles
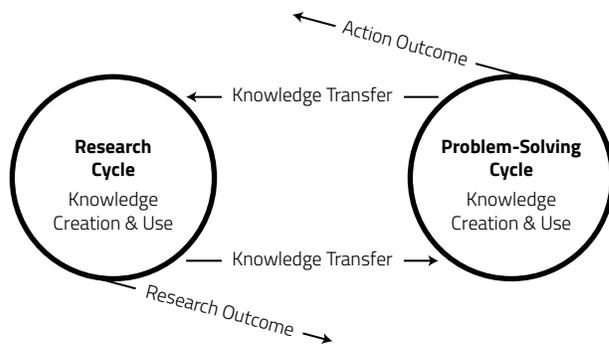
Source: Chaisson et al., 2009, p. 35.

Figure 4: Action Research Cycles Based on Susman and Evered (1978)

are not likely to find either ethnography or action research satisfactory. In the next section, we describe a promising alternative in which the roles of scholar and practitioner are integrated.

ENGAGED PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

We propose engaged participant observation as a relevant, yet underexplored, research approach that overcomes the limitations of ethnography and action research but that capitalizes on the strengths of participant observation methods. Engaged participant observation seeks to generate practical knowledge that also is scholarly. It might be conducted by researchers who are both practitioners and scholars, or by a team of scholars and practitioners. Indeed, the vast majority of research is co-authored, suggesting that author teams comprise people making different contributions. We therefore do not suggest that practitioner–scholars should work alone unless doing so offers clear advantages. However, engaged participant observation does not adhere to the separation of roles that characterizes both ethnography and action research.

Although engaged participant observation is underexplored, its origins can be traced to at least two earlier essays in the action research literature. First, Baskerville (1997) describes what he calls the "participative case study" as follows:

Using this methodology, a particular subject, group of subjects, or organization is observed by the researcher, who is one participant in the process being observed. The researcher is to some degree exercising control over some intervening variables and is a stakeholder in the outcome of the process (p. 6).

Practitioner–scholars can easily understand this situation. However, Baskerville's conception of the participative case study report differs from our expectation that practitioner–scholars would generate publishable manuscripts meeting scientific standards for theory and method. He states: "The participative case study report attempts to capture and communicate the *biased interpretation* by a stakeholder or stakeholders of their particular environment during a particular period in time" (p. 6, emphasis added). Such a biased report typically would not meet standards for scientific rigor or be seen as a contribution generalizable beyond the particular context of the research.

However, with only slight modification, Baskerville's definition of the participative case study could become the basis for a more positive view of engaged participant observation research. We therefore suggest the substitution of the following description: "The *engaged participant observation report* tries to capture and communicate the *engaged yet balanced interpretation by multiple stakeholders* of their particular environment during a particular period in time." This approach is intended to meet the standards for both scientific rigor, which is tied to research methods, and pragmatic rigor, which is tied to the feasibility of implementing problem solutions.

The second related approach found in the literature is Coghlan's (2001) "insider action research." Coghlan uses this term to refer to action research projects conducted by permanent participants who are aware of the requirements for rigor associated with scientific research. Insiders might collaborate with outside experts (e.g., university faculty), but they also understand and can articulate the theoretical issues being addressed and the value that goes beyond solving a practical problem. Insider action research engenders tensions similar to those of traditional action research (Rapoport, 1970), such as the political pressures that impinge on the researcher. These tensions are not unique to any particular kind of research, but they are especially symptomatic of research that tries to address practical problems. In practice, participants might hold different stakes in the outcome of research and the application of findings.

Table 1 summarizes the distinctions among ethnography, action research, and engaged participant observation. The key difference between the two traditional approaches and our proposed new approach is the underlying assumption about the roles of practitioner and researcher. The similarities suggest that all three approaches capitalize on the value of direct observation, and tensions are present in all three. In the following section, we explore ways of resolving the tensions experienced in our own engaged participant observation study.

TENSIONS IN ENGAGED PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION: RECOGNITION AND RESOLUTION

In this section, we focus on four issues that practitioner–scholars face in conducting engaged participant observation: (1) identity and relationship work, (2) potentially biased interpretation, (3) ethical conduct, and (4) publication. Each of these issues contains tensions for practitioner–scholars — tensions that can be resolved if they recognize and address them in a

TABLE 1: Comparisons Among Approaches to Participation Observation

Participant Research Approach	Capitalizes on Value of Observational Data	Assumptions about Researcher and Practitioner Roles	Subject to Tensions Related to Practice and Scholarship
Ethnography	Yes	Separate	Yes
Action research	Yes	Separate	Yes
Engaged participant observation	Yes	Integrated	Yes

timely fashion. To enhance the account of these issues and how they might be addressed, we express them using the words of the second author, who experienced all of these issues in the qualitative field work for his dissertation (Taylor, 2015).[3]

Identity and Relationship Work

The opportunity to be an engaged participant observer came while doing my dissertation, which focused on the relationship between my companies and our principal community partner. My companies are the largest (in revenue production and customer base) service contractors for participatory art forms (Noice, Noice and Kramer, 2014) for DeValle County Recreation Department.[4] My businesses are privately owned, and the partner is a government entity. This collaboration began in 2011 and continues to date. This relationship involves the collaboration and alignment of daily operational, marketing, and business strategies between the company employees and the county employees. New relationships were created and habits of interaction were formed.

Although the partner's employees identified me and my staff as competent business professionals, my new role as a researcher was met initially with curiosity, then with speculation, and finally with acceptance. County employees hesitated during interviews before sharing detailed stories with me because they were suspicious about my motivation for taking on this new role. Was I really interested strictly in research, or would I use the information to further my own interests? Would I reveal what seemed to them to be corrupt or unethical practices? Although I knew about some possible unethical activities, I assured my respondents, "Don't worry; I'm not going there." This reassurance allowed me to retain the trust I had already established as a contractor. However, research was not seen as my primary role, and manager and associate were accepted as my dominant identity. As a result, my expanded and multiple identities were accepted.

In addition to having to clarify these roles to others, I found that playing the roles of both researcher and practitioner created personal tensions that were difficult to resolve completely. Especially taxing was giving equal attention to my researcher role because the practitioner role was naturally more familiar and dominant. I initially had a sense of artificiality in performing the research role, as though I simply was masquerading as a researcher. The relationships I had with some of the people I interviewed in the partner organization spanned almost ten years. Approaching these same people with a different purpose and an interview consent form to sign initially seemed quite awkward.

In time, I became more comfortable when explaining the reason for what initially seemed to me to be contrived encounters. I discovered that the tacit understanding of trustworthiness that existed prior to my becoming a researcher aided my ability to function in the research role. I felt trusted, which was important in both the practitioner and researcher roles, and the people I interviewed recognized that the knowledge I gained would not be used against them because I was also still one of them. Although I was initially self-conscious about separating the two roles of researcher and practitioner, I soon realized that they could be more closely interwoven. Understanding the practical issues we spoke about in the interviews was easy for me, and I could see how the research findings would be useful in practice.

To support my researcher role, I kept notes on a small paper notepad and in the note-taking section of the analysis software as I read through the interview transcripts. For example, if the interview included information that seemed irrelevant to the research process, my notes reminded me to move on and not to probe deeply into areas not pertinent to the research question. Although the distracting information at some point might inform my practice role, the notes served as a self-check and a reminder to remain focused on the research.

Managing the politics involved presented another challenge. In some cases I knew that certain topics were misrepresented in the interview process to gain political leverage. Some interviewees over-praised my company because they thought that ingratiating themselves to me would provide an opportunity for them to advance politically. In the interview, they spoke highly of people whom they otherwise disrespected. Other interviewees took the opportunity to say what they really felt in the harshest possible way because they knew they were leaving their position before the information went public. These people tended to be very critical of policies and of the people both above and below them in the organization hierarchy.

In our work relationships, some interviewees had been negligent in providing the equipment, space, and personnel on which I depended to deliver my company's services. However, these interviewees misrepresented themselves in the interview as being fully compliant in their relationship with contractors. Faced with this contradiction, at times I wanted to probe in the interview to collect what seemed to be more truthful detail. I hesitated to disregard what seemed to be insincere remarks because I needed to maintain the integrity of the research process and, to do so, needed to report more truthful and accurate responses. I later realized that maintaining the integrity of the research process meant that my practitioner identity should *not* distort what was being conveyed in the interviews because respondents were reporting their own

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[3] The first-person pronouns in this section (e.g., I, me, my) signify the second author's first-hand account.

[4] Pseudonym. The county includes approximately 700,000 residents and is demographically diverse. It has a median household annual income of approximately $50,000 and an 18% poverty rate.

subjective experiences. As a researcher, I had to privilege their versions rather than my own. Thus, I resolved the tension by forcing my researcher identity to overrule temptations of my practitioner identity to pursue more "accurate" reports.

Potentially Biased Interpretation

Potential bias was another difficult obstacle to overcome. As a manager, writing in a way that favored what I felt to be "correct" felt very natural. From my perspective, my companies consistently outperformed our partner in numerous areas, offering superior services and output that contrasted with the inferior service and output of our partner. Our services seemed superior in the areas of customer service, responsivity, and general adaptability to changing circumstance. This impression also resulted from positive customer feedback, which reinforced the perceptions of being more customer-centered, responsive, and adaptable. My pride in accomplishment was brought to my attention during my first formal presentation of the dissertation proposal: I had loaded the slide deck with photos of the awards that I and my arts students had achieved, and my committee members noted how proud I obviously was of my companies' successes, but that I might have a hard time overcoming my positive bias in my research.

To control for my potential bias, I used a "disinterested" colleague to challenge my interpretations of the data. My research chair (the first author) probed my research and found that some of the information I had included, while personally important, had no relevance to the research question. Staying on task as a researcher helped me to avoid self-aggrandizing asides that would only distract the reader. More importantly, the first author directly challenged me to explain why my analysis showed organizational learning only by the client's employees, while the research was to be focused on *inter*organizational learning. "What did you learn from them?" he asked.

Answering this question forced me to reflect on what I and my companies learned about doing contract work and led to important insights about the role of conflict in interorganizational learning. For example, much of the interorganizational learning that occurred came through the resolution of conflict. Intuitively, I considered conflict to be evidence of a maladaptive partnership, but each time a conflict was resolved, learning happened and trust was built. Learning from each other and overcoming obstacles to the collaborative effort made active engagement and improvement in marketing and operations possible and provided higher quality service to our customers.

I also learned to appreciate the unique characteristics of government agencies as clients and their motivations for hiring contractors like me. I learned more about the value delivered to their client base and became more aware of my values and their relation to the needs of DeValle County's population. Looking beyond potential biases taught me to see what the people I served felt was valuable.

Ethical Conduct

Qualitative research should be conducted as a moral practice (Mason, 1996), requiring researchers to ensure ethical conduct. Doctoral training includes ample coverage of research ethics; in U.S. universities, internal review boards (IRBs) also review all proposals involving human subjects to ensure that research conforms to the ethical treatment of research subjects. In developing my dissertation proposal, I adhered to the scientific standards for qualitative research and responded to the requests for clarification from the IRB. Thus, my work was officially approved by a faculty oversight committee charged with enforcing federal regulations.

Such approval does not guarantee safe passage through all of the tensions related to ethical conduct. IRB would not allow me to interview my own employees because of the possibility of perceived coercion. In simple terms, the IRB wanted me

to avoid possible coercion of employees who would otherwise be free to opt out of a study. My interviews thus were restricted to people in the partner's organization, and I secured the services of another interviewer to conduct the interviews with my companies' employees. My ensuing tension resulted from questions about whether the interviewer, who had no insider knowledge, would be able to probe the employees to obtain authentic responses. Transcript evaluations revealed several responses from interviewees that might have been more deeply probed if I, as a trained a practitioner–scholar with a relational history, had conducted the interview. I was concerned that the interviews with my companies' employees would be less revealing and relevant than the interviews I conducted myself with the partner employees.

Reading all of the transcripts generated by the third-party interviewer provided some resolution of this tension. In some cases, the responses did not reveal specific issues that I would have wanted to uncover, but in others, they revealed issues that I would have missed entirely. For example, people across the organizations had formed relationships of which I had not been aware. In one instance, a manager in my company had developed a friendship with the secretary of one of our partner's directors. This relationship was instrumental in the dissemination of marketing materials to the customers, which affected revenue and participation. This relationality became a relevant theme in my research findings related to interorganizational cooperation. The benefits of using an outside interviewer thus included not only avoiding perceived coercion but also gaining valuable insights into relationships.

Although in this case the IRB's guidance on coercion pertained only to the employees of my companies, the issue of coercion also might be considered from the perspective of scholar–practitioners on other interviewees. To illustrate, my companies provide important services to DeValle County's recreation centers; the centers'

directors are evaluated by their administration on community involvement and revenue. My work affects performance in both areas. At times the willingness of the center directors to participate in my studies seemed to be influenced by my ability to affect the measures by which they were evaluated. Although this influence did not seem to me to represent a breach of ethics, I realized that the interview data represented subjective and biased perspectives, which potentially influenced both the content of the interviews and the interpretation, as discussed earlier.

Conflicts of interest also are a major concern of IRB committees. The committee had no concerns in my case, but on further reflection, I wondered whether my interviewing directors who also contracted with my competitors might reveal information that could provide me with a competitive advantage. A conflict of interest could arise if I used the research results to gain advantages in the competitive marketplace. I addressed this potential conflict of interest by ensuring that research questions and data analysis addressed only the relationships pertinent to my companies' interactions with our corporate collaborators.

Publication

One of the main purposes of adhering to scientific research methodologies is to enhance the prospects for subsequent publication of research findings in a peer-reviewed outlet. Although a completed dissertation is considered to be "published" and is made available publicly, it is supervised and reviewed by a relatively small group of people with ties to the practitioner–scholar's university. Peer-reviewed journals normally expand the review process by drawing from anonymous experts not affiliated with the same university as the author.[5] Journals also expect dissertations to be converted into digestible-length, shorter articles. This additional work occurs after completion of the doctorate degree and therefore involves

new tensions related to motivation and the allocation of time between practice and research writing.

My motivation to produce high-quality research was twofold. First, I wanted to establish myself as a professional in entrepreneurship, with a reputation that would bring public awareness to my companies and to me as a reliable and effective consultant. Publishing in a respected journal could help others to see me as an expert on a particular topic. I also was excited about providing transferable guidance to entrepreneurs who wanted to understand private–public collaborations. As a published practitioner–scholar, I might be given opportunities to lecture to students or professional groups, or to teach classes in entrepreneurship.

My second reason for the research was to improve my companies by learning from my own research. Publishing articles supports learning because feedback from reviewers and the ongoing engagement with the research help to sharpen arguments and focus contributions. The more I could learn from writing about my companies and their relationships with clients, the better I could apply what works and avoid what doesn't. Scholarship is satisfying because it provides a means to deliver higher quality services to the communities I serve.

My motivations clearly reflect the importance of both scientific and pragmatic rigor. Without scientific rigor, I have little chance of publishing in respected journals; without pragmatic rigor, I have little chance of influencing practice effectively. Both types of rigor impose demands on my practitioner scholarship, and these demands surfaced as tensions as I sought to publish my research projects.

All writing for publication generates tensions and frustrations when manuscripts are rejected or when revision requests seem overwhelming. Preparing manu-

scripts for publication can consume many hours and requires advanced skills in writing, crafting arguments, and reading related works. In this context, one hopes that the rewards from publishing are worth the effort. For practitioner–scholars, the incentives are different from the "publish-or-perish" incentives faced by career academicians. My attempts to resolve the effort–reward tensions are in process as I focus efforts on publishing my research. Thus far, my commitment to both scientific and pragmatic rigor and my internal motivation remain strong. The development of journals for engaged scholarship, written by practitioner–scholars, can help to resolve some of the remaining tensions in the dissemination of research.

DISCUSSION

All types of participant observation involve tensions, as noted in Table 1. Table 2 summarizes the tensions inherent in the three approaches to participant observation considered in this article. We argue that dealing with the tensions in engaged participant observation requires different guidance than what typically is provided for ethnography and action research.

The most obvious difference across methods is the tension related to relationship and identity work. While ethnographers must gain entry and establish a legitimate role, engaged participants are inside already and have a predefined role. They already have "gone native," which is not viewed as a problem because, unlike ethnographers, they need no exit strategy. In comparison to action research, engaged participant observation does not rely on a contract between researchers and clients because the researcher is the client. In our experience, practitioner–scholars should disclose their dual role to the members of their organizations and try to integrate the roles of researcher and practitioner. This integration ensures a balanced focus on both scientific and pragmatic rigor. In ad-

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[5] Journal reviewers are discouraged from reviewing a paper written by an author from the same university because of the perceived conflict of interest.

Table 2. Managing Tensions in Three Methodological Approaches to Participant Observation

	Ethnography	Action Research	Engaged Participant Observation
Relationship and identity work	• Gain access and acceptance as outsider. • Establish role. • Manage relationship. Exit.	• Establish split roles representing different interests. • Abide by contractual agreement.	• Assume and disclose dual roles. • Integrate practitioner and scholar roles.
Potentially biased interpretation	• Control bias related to academic identity and values. • Acknowledge elitism and interest in theory. • Obtain outside reviews.	• Define both researcher's and sponsor's interests and limits in the contract.	• Check biases with a disinterested party. • Expand insight by extending beyond preconceptions.
Ethical conduct	• Obtain institutional review. • Disclose researcher role. • Avoid action consequences of research.	• Obtain institutional review. • Formally limit researcher's ethical exposure.	• Obtain institutional review. • Balance interests of multiple stakeholders. • Use research findings to understand stakeholder positions.
Publication	• Author scholarly books and articles.	• Publish research that protects sponsor's proprietary knowledge while contributing to theory and practice.	• Strengthen research contribution through publication. • Contribute to theory and practice.

dition, people who are used to seeing the practitioner–scholar in the practitioner role adjusted rather easily to an alternate dual persona. The trust and closeness of relationships established as a practitioner can extend into the dual practitioner–scholar role, making it easier to establish rapport and obtain useful data. Integration of research and practice does not remove the tensions inherent in engaged participant observation, but it avoids the somewhat artificial separation of the activities into separate roles. Although practitioner–scholars might not learn the same things as classic ethnographers, they can perform the dual roles of researcher and practitioner. We found that taking notes about the research process led to better reflection—the capacity to step back from practice to attain the vantage point of the researcher.

With respect to potential biases, the second column in Table 2, each form of participant observation invites biases because observational data in each case are filtered through the preconceptions and selective attention of the researcher. In ethnography, researchers are influenced by their academic values and theory. They are subject to elitism and apt to construct observations that align with their preferred theories. In action research, the biases are aligned according to the different interests of the researcher and the client. To the extent that such biases are known in advance, they can be better managed by including terms in the contract. For example, researchers might wish to see written guarantees of their right to use data in publications, while clients might wish to receive oral presentations and summaries to guide action. The engaged participant observer's primary bias is to favor his or her stake in the organization and the organization's stake in outside business relationships. Our experience in managing these tensions revealed that respondents

might be cautiously strategic in giving responses because of their ongoing practice relationships with the researcher. As a result, practitioner–scholars must find ways to gather data that are not distorted to please the researcher. Using an independent, third-party interviewer is one technique that has merit. Potential bias also can be managed, in part, by adhering to a disciplined process of data analysis. Guidance on qualitative research provides detailed suggestions on how to code interview data and field notes, how to collapse and combine initial coding categories into interpretive themes and constructs, and how to write up convincing accounts. In addition to this traditional advice, we advocate the use of dialogue between practitioner–scholars and a disinterested third party. In our case, the pairing of an executive doctoral student with a faculty supervisor generated a dialogue in which the supervisor challenged and helped to

resolve interpretations as part of the data analysis.

Each of the three approaches to participant observation introduces ethical considerations, given that research has possible (and sometimes intended) consequences for the lives of people being studied. Most institutionally based research is reviewed by an IRB, which focuses mainly on protections for human subjects and researchers' conflicts of interest. However, an institutional review does not automatically resolve all of the potential ethical issues involved with participant observation. Ethnographers typically avoid intervention in the settings they study and remain content with a rich interpretation of their findings (e.g., Barley, 1990; Zuboff, 1988). Although they avoid the ethical implications of their own actions, this approach might raise other ethical issues if researchers fail to act to alleviate problems they observe. By remaining neutral, ethnographers might perpetuate social harm through inaction. Action researchers generally negotiate the terms of engagement and the limits of ethical commitments, but these contracts might not cover every expected situation. By relegating responsibility for implementation issues to the client or sponsor, the action researcher might avoid direct involvement with many ethical issues. Our experience with engaged participant observation indicates that institutional review is not sufficient to resolve all ethical issues that might arise. Our best advice for managing ethical issues as an engaged participant is to be sensitive to the interests of multiple stakeholders and to weigh the consequences of any action's effect on them. Because the research process uncovers ample evidence about stakeholders, data analysis gives researchers a more solid basis for making ethical judgments in practice.

The final area of tensions is related to publication of research summarized in the fourth column of Table 2. Both ethnographers and action researchers are scholars with strong incentives to publish their work in peer-refereed academic journals. Because ethnographers generally do not intervene in the settings they study, they are relatively free to write research reports that speak mainly to other academics.[6] Their work might adhere to standards of scientific rigor, but it often is devoid of pragmatic rigor. The action researcher also must publish academic articles, in which the sponsor might have no interest as long as the problem is solved. A dual focus on both scientific and pragmatic rigor is explicit in the action research contract but typically is distributed across the two specialized roles. Action researchers can manage tensions associated with publication by protecting the client's proprietary knowledge. Practitioner–scholars need to reconcile their position on publication as an exercise requiring both scientific and pragmatic rigor. In some cases, practitioner–scholars might grow weary of writing, rewriting, and responding to reviewers and editors. Without strong incentives to publish, they might become more concerned with the pragmatic rigor associated with practice than with the scientific rigor needed for publication.

Although some scholar–practitioners might view publication without strong incentives as a waste of time, our belief is that publication has at least two compelling benefits. First, research is made better by the peer review process that occurs after a paper is submitted to a journal. The findings might shift in valuable ways, and the validity of the study might be enhanced. This process results not only in a more valuable publication, but also in a stronger foundation for practical interventions based on the research. Second, scholarly work is distinguished from other kinds of evidence-based management by its commitment to public dissemination.[7] The practitioner–scholar's work must be open to inspection by peer reviewers. Scholarship persuades when it is rigorous, transparent, relevant, and publicly accessible. As practitioner–scholars generate findings from engaged observation studies, they should strive to share their findings in published form.

Figure 5: Scientific and Pragmatic Rigor

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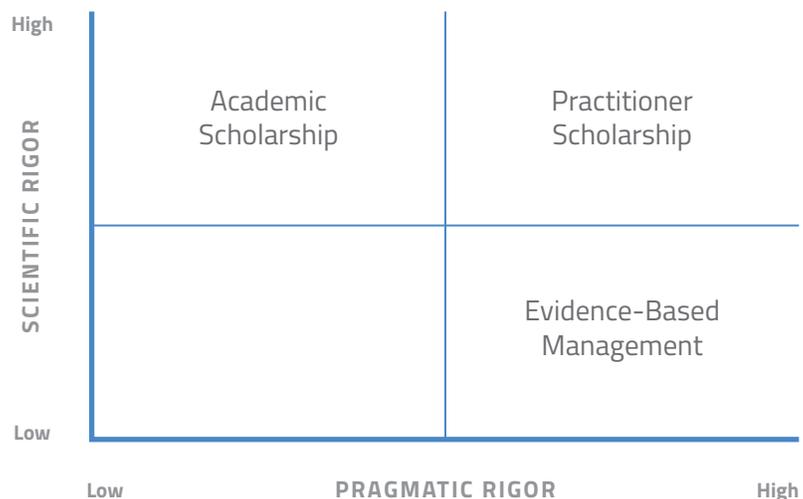
[6] In fairness, such reports are often highly engaging because of the richness of their accounts of situated action, but they are also lengthy and laced with theoretical interpretation.

[7] As one colleague recently declared when asked about the desirability of publishing, "research without publication is just a lifestyle."

These points are presented in Figure 5, which suggests a relationship between scientific and pragmatic rigor. Figure 5 shows four quadrants based on combinations of high and low rigor. We ignore the situation in which both scientific and pragmatic rigor remain low. If scientific rigor is low but pragmatic rigor is high, we might still derive strong recommendations for evidence-based management. Effective managers have always grounded their decisions in evidence, although usually not evidence that meets scientific criteria for reliability, validity, transparency, generalizability, and other requirements. Pragmatic rigor might be achieved through careful evaluation of available evidence, logical conclusions based on intimate knowledge of the context, and operating theories derived from past experience.

Meanwhile, much academic scholarship lacks pragmatic rigor and ultimately is suitable only for academic journals that practitioners rarely read. Although high scientific rigor might eventually produce practical applications, it typically lacks immediate relevance for practice. Only when research authors combine high scientific rigor with high pragmatic rigor, as shown in Figure 5, can we claim to be producing practitioner scholarship. As our essay has argued, practitioner scholarship introduces tensions between the efforts to attain each type of rigor simultaneously, but it also bears fruit by strengthening the foundation for management action and by sharing results in publications that can be consumed by others.

The development of and participation in journals that publish engaged scholarship is a sign that practitioner–scholarship is valued. Some academic journals also look for ways to promote research that has practical implications without sacrificing scientific rigor (Ghobadi & Robey, in press; Rai, 2017). To advance these initiatives further, some formalization of standards and criteria for evaluating pragmatic rigor would be worthwhile so that judgments about publication do not consider scientific rigor exclusively. Developing such standards and criteria is beyond the scope

of this article, but future essays could formally elaborate on the specific criteria underlying terms such as feasibility, relevance, and practicality, so that both researchers and reviewers would have more consistent guidance for evaluating practitioner scholarship.

CONCLUSION

We conclude with recommendations for the training of practitioner–scholars. Our analysis suggests that such training requires carefully prescribed departures from traditional approaches to participant observation in qualitative field studies. Practitioner scholarship in action cannot be accomplished simply by using traditional research methods developed originally for disengaged scholars who have weak connections to research settings. Although engaged scholarship (Van de Ven, 2007), participant observation (Jorgensen, 1989), and action research (Susman and Evered, 1978) all offer prescriptions for academic scholars who engage with practice, they do not address the specific needs of practitioner–scholars. Our aim in this essay is to suggest a new approach—engaged participant observation—that draws from traditions in qualitative research methodology but that also modifies the traditional guidance. Our suggestions could be easily incorporated into the educational experience provided by executive doctoral programs, allowing practitioner–scholars to approach field research in their own organizations more confidently.

Our recommendations on qualitative research methods can serve as a starting point for similar adaptations of research methods for practitioner–scholars. We hope that our initial step in charting more appropriate research methods for this new territory can be extended to include methods such as field experiments (Franz, Robey & Koeblitz, 1986), field stimulations (Salancik, 1979), and other methods involving interventions into natural work settings. Where the aim is to introduce policy interventions aimed at organiza-

tional improvement, and to understand why and how these interventions influence performance, practitioner–scholars need to apply research methods that are both scientifically and pragmatically rigorous. Such methods should be codified as part of an ongoing canon of practitioner scholarship.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Daniel Robey is Emeritus Professor of Information Systems and Associate in the Center for Engaged Business Research at Georgia State University. He received his Doctorate in Business from Kent State University, Kent, OH. He was Editor in Chief of *Information and Organization* from 2000 to 2014 and remains a Senior Editor for the journal. He received the 2009 LEO award, bestowed by the Association for Information Systems and the International Conference on Information Systems, for a lifetime of distinguished contribution. He also received the Lifetime Service Award from the Organizational Communication and Information Systems Division of the Academy of Management in 2010.

Wallace Taylor is an entrepreneur and business person. He is currently the owner of Taylor Holdings International, Inc., and is also the Founder/CEO of The Taylor Foundation for the Arts. He received his Doctorate in Business from Georgia State University, Atlanta, GA. His entrepreneurial experience spans more than 10 years of successful initiation and implementation of private and non-profit organizations. He has worked in executive capacities in the fields of finance, technology, and real estate. His current work with participatory art in the field of public health serves a community of 2,000 students and involves contracts and collaboration between private, non-profit, and government entities. Through The Taylor Foundation for the Arts, his charitable outreach includes providing for the medical, educational, and financial needs of the children of the Moken tribe.in Ban Kho Nok, Thailand (Phang Nga Province), and creating collaborative partnerships with The City of Clarkston (Clarkston, GA), which is home to one of the largest concentrations of refugees in the United States.