



Developing international business knowledge through an appreciative inquiry learning network: Proposing a methodology for collaborative research



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ABSTRACT

This paper argues for the need for methodological development within international business (IB) research. This need is born out of the dominance of positivistic research within the field which both marginalizes other scientific approaches and jeopardizes practical relevance. The purpose of this paper is to consider collaborative research, almost non-existent within IB research, as a possible way forward. A performed collaborative research project and its methodology is described and lessons learned, challenges and possibilities are discussed. Our conclusion is that collaborative research may bridge the possible gap between scientifically valid and practically relevant results, but that this requires collaboration and interaction to permeate the whole research process, from planning, through execution to post-project activities.

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1. Introduction

The background of the research addressed in this article is the global financial crisis that started in 2008 and the tensions and challenges this crisis inflicted upon the international business of small and medium sized export-dependent companies to adapt to this new situation. A research project was initiated to develop robust and practically actionable knowledge about the internationalization strategies of Swedish small and medium sized companies in emerging markets by focusing on organizational learning in turbulent times. In planning the project, it was soon realized that it is hard to develop new knowledge in small firms, since there are very few parties within the firm to share it with. So, to develop such organizational knowledge, the firm needs to collaborate with other firms to share experiences. It was also discovered that to succeed in such an endeavor, the collaboration needs to be pragmatic or useful by favoring the individual interests of the firms. Due to the complexity of such research, it can hardly be handled by one researcher alone. Thus, to study collaboration among SMEs based on their own interests, researchers need to collaborate among themselves. There are a few studies on joint

project teams collaborating in doing IB research (Salmi, 2011), but none that examines how researchers collaborate with firms on equal terms to develop joint knowledge. So, no relevant existing methodology could be found for such a study. The rather ordinary qualitative methodology reviewed by Salmi (2011) does not help much, since it is based on viewing firms as research objects. This also goes for international business (IB) research in general, which is quantitative, and ignores the possibility of knowledge generation through collaboration with firms.

Although qualitative research has been part of the international business field since its origin (Birkinshaw, Yoko Brannen, & Tung, 2011), and has become more important in past decades (Marschan-Piekkari & Welch, 2004a; Piekkari & Welch, 2006), it is still under-represented. As shown by Marschan-Piekkari and Welch (2004b) in an article about the state of the art of qualitative research methods in international business, it tends to be marginalized and given a low status. One major reason is that most qualitative research is based on some type of interpretive and anti-positivistic paradigm in a field dominated by quantitative methods built on the pursuit of scientific laws (Hunt, 2003; Yang, Wang, & Su, 2006). A review of articles published in six leading IB journals between 1991 and 2001 showed that only 10% of the articles used qualitative methods (Andersen & Skaates, 2004). According to another review (Yang et al., 2006), questionnaires continue to dominate as the primary data collection method within the field, being utilized in as much as 50% of the empirical

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studies. Qualitative research in IB, when it is performed, is dominated by case studies based on data collected from in-depth interviews (Piekkari & Welch, 2006; Piekkari, Welch, & Paavilainen, 2009). Pragmatic and normative aspects are usually treated as implications. Other approaches, such as collaborative research approaches and action research, remain almost unexplored. Furthermore, much of the qualitative research being done within IB continues to share the positivist assumptions traditionally connected with quantitative research, ignoring much recent epistemological and ontological debate within business and management studies inspired by, for instance, postmodern philosophy, hermeneutics and critical theory (Marschan-Piekkari & Welch, 2004b). The special issues in *Management International Review* 2006 and *Journal of International Business Studies* 2011 made significant contributions to promote qualitative methodology in ways that take the particular characteristics of IB into account, such as being multi-cultural, multi-disciplinary and context dependent. This is done by, for instance, problematizing the use of case studies (Welch, Piekkari, Plakoyiannaki, & Paavilainen-Mäntymäki, 2011), as well as the use of interviews for gathering data (Welch & Piekkari, 2006), arguing for the use of mixed methods (Hurmerinta-Peltomäki & Nummela, 2006), and introducing new approaches to the field, such as narrative inquiry (Gertsen & Söderberg, 2011; Söderberg, 2006), and discursive approaches (Balogun, Jarzabkowski, & Vaara, 2011). Even though some of these articles problematize the relationship between researcher and subject when doing research and formulating theory (such as Söderberg, 2006; Welch & Piekkari, 2006) none of these contributions explicitly explore the potential of eliminating the distancing between researcher and subject altogether and instead forming a collaborative relationship in search of knowledge. Given the efforts of qualitative methodology to come as close to the research phenomena as possible (Birkinshaw et al., 2011) this would seem as a potentially valuable ambition. We therefore acknowledge the efforts made so far and concur with their potential to develop IB research (Doz, 2011) but still see the need for more methodological pluralism within international business research, as well as continuous epistemological and ontological reflection. In this paper, our purpose is to contribute to this ongoing development of qualitative methodology within the IB field by promoting collaborative research which, thoughtfully performed, offers significant potential in addressing some of the particular characteristics of the field.

To address the issues raised in this paper, we break away from the neo-positivist assumptions governing most traditional international business research where reality, also social reality, is seen as independent and external from the researcher, and where this reality can be accurately studied and truthfully described through theory with the goal of producing generalizable results (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Our research is in line with the growing interest in scientific research performed in interaction and collaboration with public organizations and private business partners, sometimes said to be part of a greater change in the social production of knowledge (Pettigrew, 2004). Politicians, fueled by a discourse putting scientific development and innovation to the forefront of societal progress and prosperity, often advocate research that is both scientifically valid and practically useful, preferably at the same time. This discourse is also disseminated to various public and private financiers of research. Additionally, within management and business research this development has made its mark. Even though various forms of collaborative research with partners outside the research community have a long history within the business and management disciplines, there is a growing interest in research which does not approach organizations, companies or businesspeople as mere study objects, but instead as active joint partners in the creation of knowledge. The underlying rationale of such approaches is often expressed as a double objective of

producing knowledge that is both scientifically valid and practically relevant (MacLean, MacIntosh, & Grant, 2002; Pettigrew, 2004). Many scholars acknowledge today that academic research within management is seldom used by practitioners and not even perceived as relevant to their interests (Alvesson, 2013; Bennis & O'Toole, 2005; Kmetz, 2011; Pasmore, Stymne, Shani, Morhman, & Adler, 2008; Starkey & Madan, 2001; Van den Ven & Johnson, 2006). To overcome this lack of perceived relevance and at the same time keep high scientific standards now seems to be one of the major challenges within business and management research (Starkey & Tiratsoo, 2007).

The challenges met in joint research with outside partners also bring another dilemma to the forefront, which is the potential conflict of interest between the parties. The role and identity of the researcher, put in a closer relation to and interaction with the research subject, is different when compared to collaboration among researchers only or in traditional research, more closely resembling the situation in action research. The involvement of parties from outside the university is not only different but more active and comprehensive. Furthermore, the goals and expectations of participants are different compared to traditional research and are often not coincident. Subsequently, collaborative research projects, which span over the traditional boundaries between science and practice, need to be properly managed to be successful (Adler, Elmquist, & Norrgren, 2009).

If collaborative research is to be beneficial to the research community, participating partners and to the creation of knowledge in society in general, there is a continuous need to address the challenges of these two dilemmas, and to provide lessons and solutions for future research projects. Two guiding questions concerning the two dilemmas met in joint collaborative research with outside partners are therefore taken up in this paper: How to produce knowledge that is both scientifically valid and practically relevant; and, how to align the conflicting interests of the research partners.

We thus report from a collaborative research project within the field of international business. We present the approach taken, some of the experiences of the involved parties (both academic and business partners), and we discuss the lessons learned for the future. The structure of the paper is as follows. First, we present different forms of collaborative research within business studies, as well as some of the methodological particularities and challenges already discussed by scholars in the field. Second, we present the theoretical background, scientific approach and methodology used within the current project. Third, we present and discuss how the project was experienced as well as our lessons for the future. Fourth, and finally, we relate the presented collaborative research approach to other approaches traditionally used within international business research and discuss its value and potential within this area of research.

2. Collaborative research approaches within business studies

Since we could not find any specific literature on collaborative research in international business, we drew on more general management research methodologies. Collaborative research can be traced back to the works of Kurt Lewin (Cunningham, 1993; Greenwood & Levin, 1998; Shani, David, & Willson, 2004) who coined the term 'action research' to label his approach. Lewin advocated that social science should take place at the site of social problems, working together with local actors, not only to understand the problems but to solve them (Maurer & Githens, 2010). Since then, a rather vast range of collaborative research approaches has been developed in different areas of social research, characterized by methodological eclecticism and sometimes close relationships and overlapping approaches (Kemmis &

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