# Overcoming the gap between academic and pratical knowledge about CSR : a methodological framework

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**SERIE RECHERCHE**

# OVERCOMING THE GAP BETWEEN ACADEMIC AND PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE ABOUT CSR: A METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

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## Abstract

**Overcoming the Gap Between Academic and Practical Knowledge about CSR: A Methodological Framework**

Whenever researchers contemplate constructing knowledge from practice and managers' experience, they are faced with a number of questions which have not yet been satisfactorily answered in the literature. Although the gap between academia and practice has already been addressed by some scholars, potential solutions are still being discussed. Therefore, this paper has two main objectives: first, to shed light on methodological and epistemological challenges related to the radical constructivist epistemological paradigm, regarding its potential to help overcome the dualism between academic and practical knowledge; second, to clarify and illustrate the answers to these challenges, as provided by this paper, in the context of a research project on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR).

Three main contributions are offered: first, we argue that the notion of generic knowledge can help overcome the gap between academic and practical knowledge; second, we offer a methodological framework for developing knowledge capturing practitioners' experience, which integrates the notion of generic knowledge. Third, we argue, through an illustrative case, that research on CSR would benefit from being carried out in the radical constructivist epistemological paradigm in order to develop not just academic knowledge but also knowledge capable of being relevant for CSR practices.

**Key words**: methodology, constructivism, generic knowledge, epistemic work, CSR.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Whenever researchers contemplate constructing knowledge from practice and managers' experience, they are faced with a number of questions which have not yet been satisfactorily answered in the literature. Although this gap between academia and practice has already been addressed by several special issues of leading academic journals[1], potential solutions are still being discussed.

When researchers want to launch a research project with this aim, they are confronted with two challenges. Firstly, they lack methodological guidelines to help them design a project for which the research findings could be considered as a valuable academic contribution while being partly based on capturing practitioners' practical experience.

Secondly, they face an epistemological challenge. Doing research which attempts to capture practitioners' practical knowledge supposes enacting deep interactions between researchers and practitioners. Such interactions may lead to changes in the researchers and/or the interviewed practitioners' initial perceptions of the issues and the practices under study. They may also lead to modification of the research design during the unfolding of research. Thus researchers' objectivity and neutrality cannot be secured, which usually means that such interactive research cannot be legitimated in positivist epistemological paradigms.

Even if the epistemological challenge can be faced in a constructivist epistemological paradigm (von Glasersfeld 1995, 2001; Le Moigne 1995), there remain a number of central issues which have not yet been settled in this paradigm. Among them, two have particularly important implications: 1) how to generalize and legitimize knowledge in a constructivist epistemological paradigm and in interpretive research (Schwartz-Shea 2006); and 2) which methodological guidelines can be referred to for developing knowledge that can be considered relevant to both academia and practice.

One exemplary field for studying these two issues is Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). The European Commission (2002, p.5) defines CSR as "a concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and in their interaction with their stakeholders on a voluntary basis". Firms face social and environmental challenges in their daily activities, and although many new propositions have been made in recent years (Mackey, Mackey and Barney, 2007; Aguilera et al., 2007; Barnett, 2007; Bansal, 2005; Matten and Moon, 2008; and Basu and Palazzo, 2008, among others), many of these contributions are still restricted to the academic world without direct contact and experience with firms. Therefore, in this research we are interested in investigating how doing research both in the methodological framework set forth in this paper and in the Radical Constructivist Epistemological Paradigm (RCEP) in which this methodological framework can be legitimized, permits to develop knowledge in the area of CSR that is more

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[1] See for instance, *Academy of Management Journal* (Rynes, Bartunek, & Daft 2001), *British Journal of*

insightful or meaningful than the current CSR literature. For this study, we base our argument on the presentation of a research project in which CSR strategies of French Multinational Corporations (MNCs) were studied (Barin Cruz, 2007).

So, this paper has two main objectives: first, to shed light on methodological and epistemological challenges related to constructivist epistemological paradigms, regarding their potential to help overcome the dualism between academic and practical knowledge (proposition of a methodological framework); second, to clarify and illustrate the answers to these challenges, as provided by this paper, in the context of a research project on CSR.

It offers three main contributions. First, by developing the notions of generic knowledge and epistemic work, it offers ways of overcoming the issues of generalization and legitimization in the radical constructivist epistemological paradigm, as well as the gap between academic and practical knowledge. Generic knowledge expresses knowledge about kinds of things and processes. It is constructed by upward extension in conceptual generality of substantive knowledge. Epistemic work can be briefly defined as the work researchers do when they behave as reflective practitioners (Schön, 1983) of scientific research.

Second, it offers a methodological framework for developing knowledge capturing practitioner's experience, which integrates the notions of generic knowledge and epistemic work.

Third, it argues that research on CSR would benefit from being carried out in the radical constructivist epistemological paradigm in order to develop not just academic knowledge but also knowledge capable of being relevant for CSR practices.

This paper is presented in two main parts. The first part offers insights on the issues of generalization and legitimization in a constructivist epistemological paradigm. The second part presents the methodological framework and illustrates the various facets of epistemic work throughout a research project carried out on the topic of CSR. The final discussion highlights the differing roles of practitioners and researchers in the framework, as well as the importance of interactions among researchers within the research team.

## 2. THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL CONTEXT: THE RADICAL CONSTRUCTIVIST EPISTEMOLOGICAL PARADIGM (RCEP)

Due to the diversity of constructivist perspectives that have been developed over the past thirty years[2], the first subsection recalls the core assumptions of the RCEP. Issues of knowledge generalization and validation in the RCEP will then be successively considered. Since the philosophical presuppositions of so-called interpretive methods (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea, 2006) are

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*Management* (Hodgkinson 2001), and *Academy of Management Executive* (Bailey 2002).

[2] See for instance, Berger and Luckman, 1966; Glasersfeld, 1984, 2001; Astley, 1985; Guba and Lincoln, 1989, 1998; Cannella and Paetzold, 1994; Van Maanen, 1995; Mir and Watson, 2000.

similar to those of radical constructivism, advances in interpretive methods on both issues will be drawn upon in the sections which follow.

## 2.1 THE CORE FOUNDING ASSUMPTIONS OF THE CONSTRUCTIVIST EPISTEMOLOGICAL PARADIGMS

Among the various constructivist perspectives, only two theories of knowledge have made their founding assumptions explicit (Avenier 2009a): Guba and Lincoln's (1989, 1998) *Constructivist Epistemological Paradigm* and Glasersfeld's (1984, 2001, 2005, 2008) *Radical Constructivism*, which was further conceptualized by Le Moigne (1995, 2008) under the label *Radical Constructivist Epistemological Paradigm.*

To avoid introducing additional labels which would only compound the difficulty of finding one's way in the constructivist maze, these labels, as they have been attributed by their respective authors, will be kept in this paper, though solely with their initials (CEP and RCEP respectively).

------ Insert Table 1 about here ------

Inspired from Guba and Lincoln (1998), Table 1 is arranged in three rows which, according to these authors, reflect Epistemology's three basic questions, namely:

*1)* The ontological question which asks: *"What is there that can be known?"*

2) The epistemological question which asks: *"What is the relationship of the knower to the known (or the knowable)?"*

3) The methodological question which asks: *"What are the ways of elaborating knowledge?"*

This table reveals major differences in the foundational assumptions of the two Constructivist Epistemological Paradigms. These Paradigms strictly agree on only one founding assumption, that which posits the unfeasibility of separating the inquirer and the phenomenon under inquiry. This founding assumption implies that humans cannot know a world beyond their own experience of it. This implies an unfeasibility of separating ontology and epistemology in Constructivist Paradigms (Guba and Lincoln 1998), which is reflected by the dashed line separating the ontological and epistemological levels in Table 1. This also makes both verification and falsification never conclusive. This is the reason why Radical Constructivists do not make any founding assumptions on the nature of what Guba and Lincoln call "reality".

## 2.2 GENERALIZATION IN THE RCEP: BUILDING GENERIC KNOWLEDGE

Knowledge generated in the contextualist perspective is usually local situated knowledge (Garfinkel 1967, Pettigrew 1987, Scherer and Steinmann 1999). It is considered contextually dependent and subjectively constructed (Gergen 1994; Mohrman et al. 2001), with an emphasis on the

uniqueness of the phenomenon studied. Hence generalization is usually not considered as a relevant question. In the RCEP, context also plays a decisive role in knowledge elaboration, since as recalled in Table 1, the knowledge elaborated is considered context and goal-dependent. Still, as is the case for other interpretive researchers, we consider generalization as an important issue in the RCEP.

### 2.2.1 THE NOTION OF GENERIC KNOWLEDGE

Glaser and Strauss' use of the phrase "formal theory" to designate the upward extension in conceptual generality of a substantive grounded theory is unfortunate, because nowadays this phrase has the connotation of a theory built by logical deduction from a priori assumptions and is most often, expressed in mathematical formalism. This corresponds less to what these authors[3] were advocating than to the notion of "generic knowledge" in the sense Prus (1987) used the phrase. For Prus "generic social processes" equate dynamic features of association that transcend the content or substantive features of group life. A particular negotiation, for example, can be envisioned as an instance of a generic process, while the items being bargained for denote the content mediated by this social form.

The notion of generic knowledge extends the notion of generic proposition developed by the pragmatist philosopher Dewey (1938). Generic knowledge expresses knowledge about kinds of things and processes rather than about particular instances— episodes or events—or about statistical regularities. It is intended to capture the core of a phenomenon, without disfiguring its nature (Gummesson, 2006). The so-called generic drugs in the medical field offer a good metaphor for grasping the meaning of the term generic in the phrase generic knowledge. A generic drug's labeling, namely its chemical name, captures the specific core of a drug which can be found under various brand names (Avenier 2009d).

In the mid-90's, this notion was taken up by researchers from various cognitive sciences (Carlson and Pelletier 1995) who engaged in investigating pending epistemic questions raised by this notion such as: how do we acquire knowledge about a certain kind of phenomenon if we have a limited number of examples, or have only experienced a single instance of the phenomenon in question?

For instance, Prasada (2000) underscored that generic knowledge involves knowledge of properties that are considered essential for being a particular kind of thing. At the same time, generic knowledge is not rendered invalid by the existence of what seem to be counter-examples. For instance, the fact that there exist some dogs that have only three legs does not render false the statement that dogs are four-legged animals. Besides, when a certain kind of thing has certain properties, it is considered to be by virtue of being that thing, not by virtue of any hidden underlying mechanism. The notion of generic knowledge is consistent with the RCEP (Avenier 2007, 2009b). All this, combined

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[3] We support the idea that theory creation in grounded theory has the same sense than generic knowledge. However, the framework proposed here goes beyond this notion of theory creation from grounded theory (construction of generic knowledge). Knowledge must also be communicated and activated (as can be seen in the following sections).

with Bendix (1978) and Geertz' (1983) approach (evoked above) suggests defining generalization in the RCEP as a process of upward extension in conceptual generality of substantive or local knowledge, using the phrase *generic knowledge* to designate the generalized knowledge obtained through this process.

The construction of generic knowledge can be accomplished through de-contextualization of local substantive knowledge *via* the systematic study of multiple comparison groups and substantive theories. Usually this implies iterations and back and forth connections of the information gathered, local knowledge developed, knowledge available in literature, conjecture made by the researcher, going back to the field in order to collect further information and even returning to academic literature from a different angle to clarify emerging notions. This process is fairly similar to that described by Pawson and Tilley (1997) for uncovering "underlying generative mechanisms". Such a rule is defined as a chunk of general knowledge linking an intervention or artifact with a desired outcome in a certain application-domain (Van Aken 2004), where general is precisely taken to mean generic.

Generic knowledge can take the form of frameworks of consistent generic propositions. It can also be expressed as technological rules and "knowledge artifacts" (Jarzabkowski and Wilson 2006), namely frameworks, generic models, and tools, such as Mintzberg's organizational configurations, Porter's five forces and generic strategy models and portfolio matrices.

## 2.3 GENERIC KNOWLEDGE: LEGITIMIZATION RATHER THAN VALIDATION

In a scientific context, the term *validation* has the strong connotation of knowledge having survived all hypothesis testing performed so far. Therefore, along with Cannella and Paetzold (1994), Le Moigne (1995), and Weick (1999), we prefer to use the word *legitimization* to refer to the process by which some value is assigned to knowledge.

### 2.3.1 THE RELENTLESS EQUILIBRATION OF EPISTEMIC WORK AND EMPIRICAL WORK

For Piaget (1967), legitimization work relies on a process of *rigorous epistemological critique* carried out by researchers themselves. In fact, what Piaget refers to under the name of epistemological critique is captured by what is now called reflexivity (Weick 1999, Tsoukas 2005, Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006). To preserve Piaget's explicit reference to epistemological concerns, the phrase *epistemic work* will be used rather than the less precise term reflexivity. This has both drawbacks and advantages (Avenier 2007).

Its main drawback is that this notion of epistemic work is different from the way Cook and Brown (1999) use this phrase. For these authors, epistemic work comes from human action itself and as a result may be largely implicit. Here, on the other hand, it is deliberate, reflexive work: digging into both the implicit assumptions made and the deep meaning of the notions that are used; tracking what seems self-evident; questioning the mutual relevance and consistency of the numerous decisions the

researcher makes along the entire research process, from the specification of the research design to the communication of the results to scholars and practitioners.

Its main advantage is to emphasize that legitimization in the RCEP rests on two legs, namely epistemic work and empirical work, which need to be recursively adapted to fit each other throughout the research project.

### 2.3.2 THE THREE MAIN FACETS OF EPISTEMIC WORK

**EPISTEMIC WORK HAS THREE MAIN FACETS (MARTINET, 2007) WHOSE RELATIVE WEIGHTS VARY DEPENDING ON THE PHASE OF THE RESEARCH PROCESS.**

The first one focuses on the knowledge published in the academic literature, that knowledge being treated as something people possess. Here, the epistemic work consists of reviewing accumulated knowledge on the topic being considered. The goal is to understand the relationships among the various notions and theories involved and to identify the precise theoretical gap that the research project will attempt to fill. This type of epistemic work is predominant during the initial literature survey and during the construction of generic knowledge. In fact, no matter what the underlying epistemological paradigm is, researchers carry out (more or less implicitly) this type of epistemic work.

The second facet focuses on knowledge which develops through human action and experience. Here, epistemic work aims at attempting to connect the knowledge already available or being constructed with the empirical material already gathered or still to be gathered. It consists of specifying the empirical situations to be studied and ways to study them, together with rendering explicit the theoretical lenses through which the organizational situations are or will be studied. It has a very strong weight during fieldwork and during the construction of generic knowledge.

The third facet concerns knowledge communication. It bears on the design of knowledge communication that is adapted to the meaning systems and contexts of each specific audience (Tenkasi et al. 2007), whether they be scholars or practitioners. The goal is to capture the audience's attention, to keep their interest, and to facilitate the appropriation of the knowledge. At present, knowledge dissemination into practice is essentially done through MBA courses, textbooks, consultants and the popular business media (Jarzabkowski and Wilson 2006). Researchers have not shown much interest in talking directly to practitioners in the diffusion of knowledge developed in research projects.

Despite the epistemic work carried out on knowledge communication, one can never be sure of the way that the audience will interpret the message (DiMaggio 1995), nor of the way knowledge will actually be put to use.

### 2.3.3 KNOWLEDGE LETIMIZATION: GOAL-DIRECTED AND CONTEXT-DEPENDENT

The legitimization offered by the researcher depends on the overall goal of the research project, as well as on the contexts in which it has been developed. These include the information obtained in the

field, and the experience, culture, and reflective nature of the members of the organization with whom the researcher interacted. It also depends on the contexts (social, industrial, cultural, economic, managerial, and so on) of the organizations chosen as fields of study.

In order to judge the scope of legitimacy that can be bestowed upon the knowledge developed in a particular research project, an academic community obviously needs to know more than simply the knowledge elaborated. It needs information on the theorizing process and the context in which it has been developed: what precisely has been extracted from the references (Weick 1995), what reasoning was employed, what evidence was relied upon, as well as any information which will enable the community to appraise the perceived intrinsic quality and mutual fit of the epistemic and empirical work carried out throughout the research project, from research design through to the communication of the research findings.

To this end, researchers need to provide a report detailing the following information: the main assumptions of the epistemological paradigm within which the research was carried out; an account of both the epistemic and the empirical work performed, showing how they were mutually adapted during the research project; the inferences made to articulate that knowledge, for instance the coding performed, the conceptual categories built, the relations established among categories (Glaser and Strauss 1967); an argumentation of the consistency of these inferences with the assumptions of the underlying epistemological paradigm; as well as any information concerning the empirical work in order to document the main criteria set forth in the literature on interpretive research (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006), namely *thick description*, *reflexivity*, *triangulation*, *trustworthiness*, *audit*, *negative case analysis*, and even *member check* when revisiting is possible.

## 3. A METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK FOR GUIDING THE CONSTRUCTION OF GENERIC KNOWLEDGE BY CAPTURING PRACTITIONERS' EXPERIENCE

Most articles and textbooks[4] on qualitative research in the social sciences depict the research process as comprising a number of successive phases or steps that are iterative and tightly linked to data (Eisenhardt 1989). The number of phases may vary from four to eight according to the level of detail chosen in defining the phases. The basic phases include: research design[5], data collection, data analysis, and reporting (Yin 1984).

Instead of representing the methodological framework set forth in this chapter in terms of a chronological sequence of *phases* or *steps*, it has been conceptualized from the standpoint of the

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[4] See, for instance, (Yin 1984; Eisenhardt 1989; Huberman & Miles 1994; Denzin & Lincoln 2003, Savall & Zardet 2004).

[5] Research design describes a flexible set of guidelines that connect the research question to theoretical notions, strategies of inquiry, and methods for collecting empirical materials.

*processes* involved. Five main processes are distinguished which, as shown in Diagram 1, can be carried out iteratively, namely:

- Conception of the research design
- Construction of local knowledge
- Construction of generic knowledge
- Communication of generic knowledge, and
- Activation of generic knowledge

------ Insert Figure 1 about here ----------

The process of conceiving the research design is always the first step. Research design then both shapes all the other processes and potentially evolves throughout the research project in relation to the actual unfolding of the other processes. The process of conceiving the research design does not appear in Figure 1, because visually representing the capability of research design to continually evolve would have considerably diminished Figure 1's readability.

These five processes will be presented individually in the following sections. They will be illustrated by examples stemming from the research project on CSR in MNCs.

### 3.1. CONCEPTION OF THE RESEARCH DESIGN

It should be underscored that at the outset of any research project, before starting to reflect on research design, the epistemological paradigm in which the research will be carried out needs to be specified.

The research design is then comprised of three main facets which are interrelated: 1) defining the general topic and clarifying the main research question that will be studied, 2) specifying the major theoretical references likely to be used, and 3) defining a strategy of inquiry (Denzin and Lincoln 2003), which consists of the research method contemplated, the type of setting within which the empirical work will be carried out, and the tactics for collecting information.

Indeed, on the one hand, "*What* we know and *how* we know are recursively linked. The kinds of research questions asked, the objects selected for study, and the criteria for evaluating knowledge claims are all intimately connected with the underlying assumptions of what is valid knowledge and how it may be obtained." (Tsoukas 2005: 6, 309)

On the other hand, "The virtues of techniques and methods cannot be determined and categorized in the abstract, because their precise nature and significance is [sic] shaped within the context of the assumptions on which the social scientist acts. Qualitative research stands for an approach rather than

a particular set of techniques, and its appropriateness – like that of quantitative research – is contingent on the nature of the phenomena to be studied." (Morgan and Smircich 1980: 499)

**Exhibit 1**: The Illustrative Case's Research Design

This research (Barin Cruz, 2007) was carried out adopting a design perspective (Simon, 2004) within the radical constructivist epistemological paradigm. The study was designed using the three facets of research design that were previously described.

***Defining the General Topic:*** The general topic was CSR strategies in MNCs. This is recognized as an important topic for future research in international management (Rodriguez et al., 2007). The research project had three main phases: 1) literature survey, 2) interviews with experts on CSR, and 3) case studies in French MNCs.

The choice of this topic stemmed from both the literature survey (phase 1) and interactions with managers of MNCs (phase 3). In the first two years of the project, the research question was expressed as: "How can CSR strategy in MNCs be formed?"

This question was derived from the literature survey in the field of Strategy and CSR (phase 1). As the project unfolded, some initial interviews were conducted with experts in the field (phase 2) and with some MNCs' managers (phase 3). A new, more precise, research question emerged from these initial interviews: "How can an integrated CSR strategy be developed between Headquarters/Subsidiaries in MNCs?" This final research question stemmed from interactions between literature surveys and conversations with experts and managers of MNCs.

***Specifying the Major Theoretical References:*** The major theoretical references evolved between the definition of the initial research question and the final one. At the very beginning, the major references concerned the general literature on strategy (deliberate/emergent strategies), CSR (proactive and reactive strategies), and complexity theory (mainly, self-eco-organization, recursiveness, hologrammic[6] and dialogic principles). Towards the end, CSR (governance, stakeholders, ethics, and learning) and Complexity Theory remained major references, while the literature on Strategy became more focused on the specific subject of Headquarter/Subsidiary integration.

***Defining a Strategy of Inquiry:*** The strategy of inquiry adopted was case studies. We focused on

[6] The hologrammic principle (Morin, 2007) highlights the apparent paradox of certain systems where not only are the parts incorporated into the whole, but the whole is incorporated into the parts, such as in the DNA chain (through DNA, a person's entire genetic inheritance can be found in each cell of that person).

French MNCs with large subsidiaries in Brazil. However, prior to the interviews with MNC managers and document collection, some interviews were carried out with experts in CSR who could help us better understand the field. Therefore, as will be shown in Exhibit 3, the three phases of the research project played an important role in the generic knowledge elaboration process.

Since they are recursively linked, the three topics involved in specifying the research design have to be handled jointly. The mutual consistency of the choices made in this specification need to be justified. The identification of the three facets of research design obviously calls for epistemic work to be performed on the central research question in reference to the literature survey.

Further epistemic work is needed once the major theoretical references and the organization[7] of fieldwork have been identified, defining the modes of knowing that will do justice to the phenomenon under study (Burrell and Morgan 1979). This work is based on answering the following questions: Which particular methods of investigation (tools or techniques) are to be chosen, why, and how should they be implemented? Which practices are to be observed[8], how, and why? Which practitioners are to be interviewed, in what order, how[9], on the basis of which interview guidelines, and why? Which organizational documents should researchers try to obtain (such as minutes, meeting reports), and why?

### 3.2. CONSTRUCTION OF LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

The primary aim of progressive gathering and processing of information, which are carried out jointly, is to build local knowledge. In this expression the term "local" (Geertz 1983) stresses the *situated* character of the knowledge built at this stage. Indeed, the legitimization of local knowledge relies on the fact that it has been elaborated at some point in time on the basis of observations, organizational documents, and practitioner knowledge and experience as narrated in interviews. Hence, local knowledge depends on the particular practitioners interviewed, their particular individual background and location in the organization being considered, which itself operates in a particular context, and so forth.

**Exhibit 2**: The process of local knowledge construction in the research project

[7] For writing purposes, we speak of an organization and field of study in the singular, as if there were only one organization involved.

[8] By "observations to be made", we mean observing what people actually do (Cook and Brown 1999), and listening to what they tell each other (Samra-Fredericks 2003).

[9] Will the interviews be semi-directive interviews, elicitation interviews (Vermersch 1999), leading to narratives of practices or of experience?

In the illustrative example presented here, local knowledge has emerged in the two final phases: interviews with experts in CSR and case studies.

Regarding the interviews with experts in CSR, ten interviews were carried out with experts in Brazil (scholars, NGO managers, Government representatives) and twelve with experts in Europe (scholars, NGO managers, consultants in the field). The interviews were semi-directive and conducted using guidelines based on the literature survey performed during phase 1.

During the first interviews, new questions emerged and were integrated into the interview guidelines for the following interviews. A content analysis (considering the most important themes cited by the interviewees) was conducted on the material collected in the first round of interviews. Eight categories initially emerged: 1) Consumer Pressure 2) Government Pressure ; 3) Media Pressure ; 4) Pressure from NGOs and Scholars; 5) Orientation of Strategic Actions; 6) Engagement of Top Managers; 7) Differences between Discourse and Practice; and 8) Employee Awareness.

Another content analysis was conducted on the material collected in the second round. This led to consolidation of the eight initial categories into four: 1) Governance Structure; 2) Management of Stakeholders; 3) Ethical Position; 4) Learning Organization.

Regarding the case studies, the first eight categories served as basic initial topics for the interviews with MNC managers and for the first documents analysis. Then, during this phase, the eight categories were progressively consolidated in the four categories cited above. Those, in turn transformed into three final categories within which the local knowledge was built: 1) Governance Structure; 2) Ethical Position; 3) Learning Organization.

Epistemic work associated with knowledge construction relies on studying theoretical references relative to notions encountered in fieldwork, and the specification of the empirical work performed, and yet to be performed. The latter is based on answering questions such as: How should the interview guidelines be progressively adapted? Are there any practitioners, other than those initially included, whom it would be relevant to interview for triangulation purposes? Does the research question appear to be related to the concerns and experiences of the practitioners interviewed? Is the local knowledge under elaboration shared by all of the interviewees? etc.

### 3.3. CONSTRUCTION OF GENERIC KNOWLEDGE

The construction of generic knowledge is a process that is accomplished as a conceptualization and de-contextualization of local substantive knowledge *via* the systematic study of multiple comparison groups, possibly taken from other case studies (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Charmaz 2003). Exhibit 3 provides an example of tentative generic knowledge developed in "the research project".

**Exhibit 3:** Example of generic knowledge regarding CSR strategies in MNCs

In the illustrative research project presented here, the construction of generic knowledge was done between phases 2 and 3 (described in Exhibit 2). At the end of phase 2, four main themes had emerged from the interviews with experts: 1) Governance Structure, 2) Management of Stakeholders, 3) Ethical Position, and 4) Learning Organization. Although these themes constituted the basis for the case studies, in order to specify the interview guidelines and to study the collected internal company documents, it was important to go back to the literature. In this process, it was possible to organize the main theoretical contributions around each theme, while, at the same time, seeing some potential similarities among some of the themes. Management of stakeholders was considered as a transverse thematic that should be dealt with the other three thematic (governance structure, ethical position, and learning organization). In other words, Management of stakeholders should be discussed in each theme and not as a separate theme. This feeling from the literature survey was corroborated by the case studies of phase 3.

Three types of propositions (Corbel et al. 2007) were built in this research project: epistemic (at a more fundamental level), conceptual (at the theoretical level), and operational (at a practical/managerial level). A total of seven epistemological, twelve conceptual and sixteen operational propositions were constructed. An example of each type of proposition can be seen as follows:

***Epistemic Proposition:*** Regarding the CSR strategy, MNCs gain by considering the relationship Headquarter/Subsidiary as a hologrammic process.

***Conceptual Proposition:*** MNCs gain by keeping a CSR structure in which the relationship with the main stakeholders can be facilitated.

***Operational Proposition:*** MNCs gain by creating a transverse CSR department with members of each major department and members from their international subsidiaries.

This process illustrates how the construction of generic knowledge is related to a back and forth interplay between information collection and processing (which leads to local knowledge built from empirical material), literature surveys, and researchers' conceptualization work. This interplay takes place throughout the research project. Indeed, right up to the end of the project, the researcher has to continuously go back to the literature in order to revisit previously examined notions and to study new notions that have emerged along the way.

The epistemic work associated with this process involves checking whether the chosen conceptual references are well suited to capturing the information obtained, and whether other references would not be better suited to this task. It also consists of clarifying the newly introduced notions and of showing how they can be related to existing knowledge. This often calls for a revisiting of some of the initially studied literature, as well as for a further literature survey on notions that have emerged during the conceptualization process.

Epistemic work also relies on legitimizing the proposed inferences in order to build the meta-model or the generic principles and propositions elaborated from the various comparison groups.

Legitimization of the constructed generic knowledge depends on the epistemic work that has been performed in its production and in the process of relating it to pre-existing knowledge, as well as on its coupling with fieldwork, particularly via the local knowledge on which it is based. This legitimacy is not absolute, but contingent. Indeed, it depends on a number of circumstances, including the cognitive context in which it has been developed. Namely, the researchers' culture and the information obtained in the fieldwork, as well as the knowledge, the experience, the culture, and the reflective behavior (Schön 1983) of the involved practitioners.

Generally, in collaborative research, epistemic work for conceptualizing generic knowledge is done essentially by the researchers involved in the project (see §4.1 for a further discussion of this point). Indeed, the regular organizational tasks of practitioners do not generally leave them much time to do this type of work, even when they are interested in doing it. In fact, it is knowledge legitimization relying on rigorous epistemic work that differentiates the generic knowledge elaborated in collaborative research from that usually developed by practitioners alone. This latter is usually based more on empirical experience than on relating the generic knowledge to diverse possible conceptual references through deep epistemic work.

There are two further ways to enhance the legitimization of generic knowledge: its activation in concrete settings and its communication to those scholars and practitioners potentially interested in the developed knowledge.

### 3.4. COMMUNICATION OF GENERIC KNOWLEDGE

Communicating research findings to academic communities is a well-known requirement of scientific research. In the specific case of knowledge developed with the intention of being valuable for practice, communication to those practitioners potentially interested in the particular kind of knowledge constructed actually participates in the legitimization of this knowledge via its recognition by certain practitioners as potentially useful. Exhibit 4 provides an example of the way in which some knowledge developed in this research project has been presented to practitioners.

Both types of communication – for scholars as well as for practitioners – usually call for further epistemic work on the knowledge to be communicated, and on ways of communicating it. In the case

of interactive communication, remarks, questions, or counter-examples from the audience often spawn the need for further epistemic work and generate ideas for additional research projects.

**Exhibit 4**: Examples of knowledge communication to and with practitioners

In the illustrative research project, the generic knowledge constructed during the project was communicated in several ways and to two main audiences: scholars and practitioners.

Regarding scholars, the results were presented in various forms: 1) seminars in various universities in France and Brazil; 2) papers presented in regional-national and international conferences in the management field; 3) articles published in regional-national journals and international journals. It is interesting to note that some of these articles represent parts of the whole work (one specific case, one specific phase, etc) and that sub-dividing the work provides a means to disseminate knowledge to several different scholarly communities.

Regarding practitioners, the results were presented in two main ways: 1) specific reports sent by e-mail for practitioner verification and feedback, and 2) specific meetings at the end of the research project. (In some cases, the researcher had obtained important information from Headquarters that was unknown to the subsidiary's managers; this information was transmitted during formal and informal visits and conversations, creating an interesting space of interaction between researcher and managers.

### 3.5. ACTIVATION OF GENERIC KNOWLEDGE

Putting knowledge elaborated in a research project to practical use is both a primary purpose of generic knowledge developed in this framework, and a means to enhance its legitimization *via* putting it to the test of actual experience in authentic settings. The activation of some existing knowledge in a concrete setting can be viewed as a particular mode of intervention research (Savall & Zardet 2004) in the following way.

As a consequence of the RCEP's core assumption (summarized in Table 1), when available knowledge is put to use, it should be considered as a heuristic guide, with the goal of arousing scholar and practitioner reflection,, providing them with a broader or deeper understanding of the problem at hand, and/or stimulating their creative action.

Putting generic knowledge into action requires its contextualization and reinterpretation according to the specifics of each setting. Considering the (perceived) rich complexity of practice, contextualization cannot be treated as a mechanical process. Thus, instead of speaking of knowledge application, some authors speak of knowledge put to action or knowledge put into use. We prefer using *knowledge activation* (Tenkasi et al. 2007), the term "activation" being more specific than the terms "use" and "action". Indeed, sometimes knowledge activation does not lead to any other action than the cognitive action of attempting to integrate it into one's thought processes.

To say that an individual activates some knowledge in a particular situation means that he/she takes that knowledge into consideration in his/her thinking about the situation. Taking knowledge into consideration means accepting it as thought provoking or as a means to illuminate a problematic situation; it does not mean treating it as a prescriptive rule for obtaining some desired outcome. Knowledge activation can permit the appropriation of this knowledge, i.e. the integration of this knowledge into the individual's prior knowledge. This operation can induce modifications not only to the individual's prior knowledge, but also to their initial interpretation of the activated knowledge. In other words, when activation occurs, both the individual and the knowledge are impacted and neither is left intact. "The person who applies theory becomes, in effect, a generator of theory, and in this instance the theory is clearly seen as process: an ever-developing entity." (Glaser and Strauss 1967: 242)

**Exhibit 5**: Activation of knowledge developed in the research project

Activation of developed knowledge was not possible in all of the cases that were studied. Sometimes, managers did not have enough time to remain involved in the entire process.

However, in one specific case, knowledge was activated by two managers involved with the CSR strategy of the subsidiary of one of the MNCs studied. The researcher invited these two managers to co-author an article with him on CSR for a national conference in Brazil and an international publication. In the process of writing this article, these two managers had to interact several times with

the researcher (by telephone and e-mail) in order to appropriate some parts of the research results. At the end of this process, one of these managers went to the conference and presented the paper herself, providing her own view of the results and their implications. The research results published in the international journal are not identical to the results that came out of the initial research project: they were transformed by the vision of these two managers which was colored by experience. The appropriation of the research results by these managers will have potential direct and indirect impact on their future managerial decision processes.

Trying to activate generic knowledge in a setting other than that in which it has been developed calls for further empirical work aimed at understanding the specific circumstances of the new setting. It jointly calls for further epistemic work aimed at clarifying the deeper meaning of the notions involved and investigating the legitimacy of activating this knowledge in a new setting given its specific circumstances. Tenkasi et al. (2007) underscore that this contextualization benefits from being accomplished jointly by practitioners and researchers involved in the research project. Furthermore, contextualization often involves reconstructing the corresponding knowledge in relation to the particular setting under consideration, and this often generates new research questions to be studied.

## 4. DISCUSSION

The discussion addresses two issues. First, it examines the respective roles of practitioners and researchers in this particular methodological framework. Then, it underscores the importance of interactions among researchers within the research team.

### 4.1. THE DIFFERING ROLES OF PRACTITIONERS AND RESEARCHERS IN THE FRAMEWORK

We shall successively examine the specific roles of researchers and practitioners during the two processes of local and generic knowledge elaboration. These two processes are tightly intertwined: local knowledge elaboration is influenced by previous local and generic knowledge held by practitioners and researchers. In addition, during generic knowledge elaboration, it is often useful to go back and study more deeply certain experiences that served previously to build local knowledge.

In our experience, during the elaboration of local knowledge most of the involved practitioners behave as co-researchers. Questions addressed by researchers to practitioners concerning their experiences and practices push the practitioners to build representations of their practices – "representation" in its sense as used in Table 1 – and then to reflect on these representations in unaccustomed ways, i.e. to undertake some kind of epistemic work on their representations of their practices and experience.

Local knowledge which is generated out of interactions between practitioners and researchers is typically a co-construction between them. However, these two kinds of professionals do not play exactly the same role in this co-construction. For instance, elements of local knowledge that are elaborated in face-to-face interaction between practitioners and researchers are, usually, subsequently shaped and written down by researchers according to their perceptions and understanding of these interactions.

Another example lies in the difference between cognitive postures: researchers address questions to practitioners in a sort of Socratic searching and inquiring dialogue[10], whereas practitioners usually ask few questions. They mostly narrate their experience relative to specific situations[11]. In addition, while listening to practitioners, researchers strive to make sure that the answers obtained are sufficiently precise and detailed to enable satisfactory ulterior epistemic work. This continual questioning about empirical materials that will be needed later to progress on the epistemic front is a concern mainly, but not exclusively, of researchers.

In this process, both practitioners and researchers do epistemic work, but the kinds of epistemic work they do are different and have different goals (Avenier 2009b). Epistemic work carried out by practitioners stems mainly from their own experience and aims at providing an accurate account of it. On the other hand, researchers' epistemic work has multiple facets. For instance, it involves clarifying notions used in the organization and relating them to the academic literature, and identifying what to consider as local knowledge among all the ideas that have been expressed in the interviews and the gathered internal documents. It also involves adapting the empirical work to the knowledge progressively generated.

According to our experience, the respective roles of practitioners and researchers differ even more during the elaboration of generic knowledge. Conceptualization work corresponds more to the researchers' main professional skills and duties than to those of practitioners. During this process, the collaborative interactions between them take essentially two forms: first, researchers who are going back to practitioners to clarify points that were not examined in a sufficiently precise manner, or not at all, during the elaboration of local knowledge; second, discussing successive versions of the generic knowledge being elaborated. In our experience, these discussions tangibly enrich both parties (Avenier 2008, 2009c).

These diverging roles originate mainly from the differences in their prime functions and from the related competence, experience and knowledge that accompany these functions: a manager's prime function is to manage, while an academic researcher's prime function is to teach and do academic

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[10] This kind of dialogue corresponds to what Reason & Bradbury (2001) call a second-person action research/practice perspective.

[11] The importance of narrations in the co-production of knowledge has been recurrently underscored (Boje 1991, 1995, 2001).

research. As a result, they have different goals, knowledge, experience, competence and constraints. As a matter of fact, in research projects carried out with consultants, some consultants who were behaving as reflective practitioners (Schön 1983) were taking a more active part in the conceptualization of generic knowledge than organization managers usually do. This is probably because knowledge construction is more directly connected to the prime professional activities of consultants than to that of managers (Gummesson 2000).

So, to summarize, this methodological framework promotes interactive research between practitioners and researchers, in which these two kinds of professionals play differing and complementary roles throughout the project process. It can be considered as form of action research (Reason & Bradbury 2001) localized between the WRI-tradition and the master-apprentice approach (Eikeland 2006). Thanks to their differing and complementary roles, their collaboration is likely to influence actions which practitioners launch in the organization and, more generally, enrich both parties (Avenier 2009b, 2009c).

## 4.2 THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERACTIONS AMONG RESEARCHERS WITHIN THE RESEARCH TEAM

After mentioning the potential mutual enrichment stemming from interactions between researchers and practitioners, the importance of interactions between researchers themselves has to be underscored, particularly in this framework.

With Van de Ven and Johnson (2006) and Tenkasi et al. (2007), we consider that collaborative research projects benefit from being carried out by a research team rather than by a sole researcher. Interactions with other researchers play a crucial role, not only in the distribution of the research workload among several individuals but also, during fieldwork, to enable researchers to address more facets of the issue under consideration and in deeper ways, particularly through joint practitioner interviews. During epistemic work, interaction also helps overcome certain limits of individual introspection which have been pointed out in the so-called first-person action research/practice perspective (Reason & Bradbury 2001). This occurs in the surfacing of underlying assumptions of research, just as interactions between researchers and practitioners help in articulating practitioners' experience and tacit knowledge. In addition, by enabling the exchange and confrontation of several interpretations and theoretical entry points, development of richer pictures of the practices being studied is fostered.

Sometimes, for diverse reasons – as in the case of doctoral research, which is an individual endeavor – or due to the reluctance of certain managers to have several researchers wandering around asking questions from their staff, which could be disturbing for them, a researcher may find him/herself as a lone fieldworker. In this case, it is crucial that they do interactive epistemic work with fellow researchers from their research center or in other settings like research networks.

Like generic knowledge developed in the RCEP, this methodological framework is to be considered as providing heuristic guidelines for a certain kind of research practice. These guidelines are intended to foster reflection, offer insights on how researchers may proceed, and/or stimulate researchers' creative action by showing them plausible ways to achieve their aim of developing knowledge recognized as academically valuable, by attempting to capture practitioners' experience.

## 5. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The conceptualization of the methodological framework presented in this paper originated from the desire to offer guidelines for researchers eager to develop knowledge capturing practitioners' experience and practical knowledge. The ideas presented here are also being presented to other scholarly communities and practitioner audiences, using different illustrative examples, such as the kind of innovations that complexly-designed strategic management systems may bring about in strategizing, or, to cite another example, the generic knowledge that can be built around the issue of organizational commitment, when viewing it from the symbolic interactionism perspective.

Attempting to capture practitioner experience requires that researchers and practitioners engage in deep interactions. This necessitates that researchers accept changing their views on the research question and even on the research design during the unfolding of the research project. Because of that, legitimization of knowledge elaborated in such interactive approaches appears problematic in positivist epistemologies while it is not problematic in constructivist theories of knowledge—provided that conditions of ethical behavior, rigor and transparency are fulfilled throughout the research project (Le Moigne 1995). The capability of legitimizing knowledge that has been elaborated in interactive research relies, to a large extent, on the constructivist epistemologies' founding assumption recalled in Table 1, which postulates the unfeasibility of separating the inquirer from the inquired into. This assumption leads to various interactionist assumptions that are shared by constructivist researchers (Mir and Watson 2000).

In constructivist paradigms, generalization is a crucial issue and this paper offers a way to overcome this difficulty. Indeed, the notion of generic knowledge constitutes a legitimate way of conceiving of generalization in constructivist epistemological paradigms.

Last but not least, research projects carried out using this framework can give rise to various, mutually cross-fertilizing processes between research and practice, thereby increasing the relevance of the elaborated knowledge for both academia and practice.

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**Table 1: Core Founding Assumptions of the Two Main Constructivist Epistemological Paradigms** (Source: Avenier 2009a)

| Levels of questioning | **Radical Constructivist Epistemological Paradigm** (Glasersfeld 2001; Le Moigne 1995, 2008 ; Riegler 2001) | **Constructivist Epistemological Paradigm according to Guba and Lincoln** (1989, 1998) |
|---|---|---|
| **Ontological**<br>*What is there that can be known?*<br>*What is the nature of reality?* | ***Phenomenological assumption:***<br>Human experience is knowable, but humans cannot know such a thing as an independent, objective world that stands apart from their experience of it.<br>The existence of a unique objective world populated by mind-independent entities is neither denied nor asserted.<br>Because of the phenomenological assumption, no founding assumption on the nature of reality is made. | ***Relativist ontology assumption:***<br>There exist multiple socially constructed realities not governed by any natural laws, causal or otherwise. |
| **Epistemological**<br>*What is the relationship of the knower to the known (or the knowable)?*<br>*How can we be sure that we know what we know?* | The inquirer cannot be separated from the inquired-into.<br>The elaboration of knowledge is portrayed as a process of intentional elaboration of symbolic constructions, called representations, based on experience.<br>The notion of "truth" is meaningless because of the unfeasibility of determining if representations are similar, or not similar, to the world that has induced the experience.<br>To know is not to possess true representations of reality, but to possess ways and means of acting and thinking that allow one to attain the goals one happens to have chosen.<br>The role of knowledge construction shifts from constructing (supposedly) *true* representations to *functionally fitted* representations.<br>The knowledge elaborated is context and goal-dependant. It may induce modifications in the prior knowledge that served to build it. | The inquirer cannot be separated from the inquired-into.<br>"Truth" is defined as the best informed and most sophisticated construction on which there is consensus.<br>Theory is viewed as an act of generation, rather than the formalization of an underlying reality. |
| **Methodological**<br>*What are the ways of elaborating knowledge?* | Any methods, including hermeneutical dialectical methods, are eligible.<br>Criteria: ethics, rigor and transparency<br>Replication is not relevant. | Only hermeneutical dialectical methods of inquiry are eligible.<br>Criteria: rigor, transparency and contestability.<br>Replication is not central |

**Figure 1** - Methodological Framework for Developing Generic Knowledge Capturing Practitioner Knowledge (Source: Avenier, 2008)