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001.891(485)

THE POSITION OF CRAFT- AND PRACTICAL RESEARCH WITHIN THE ACADEMIC WORLD: A Grounded Theory of Problems and Solutions

Category: scholarly paper

Abstract: The study of applied arts through theory and methods grounded in knowledge of crafts is still an outsider within the academy and in the scientific arena. This research paper explores the field of craft- and practical research, with focus on practical researchers and their experienced position in the academic discussion.
By generating a grounded theory about the field of craft- and practical research in Sweden, the field can be discussed and understood as a part of the academic world. The generated theory shows that the main concern for researches within the field is a lack of acceptance of their research by other parts of the scientific community. The grounded theory highlights four important areas that need to be established and discussed within the field itself and with the rest of the academic world. This is important in order to understand and accept practical knowledge as a base for both theory and method in scientific research. These areas are: economy, scientific validity, communication and research purpose.
The finished theory and theoretical model can be used as a tool for growing the potential of practical research within the field of applied arts and for gaining acceptance from the broader scientific community. The theory is grounded in the Swedish field of practical research, but it can also be used in the international context and be modified thereafter.

Key Words: craft research, practical research, grounded theory, scientific validity, communication, acceptance, material culture, techne, practical knowledge

Introduction

Especially during the second half of the 20th century, the area of scientific research underwent a dramatic change and development with introduction of new interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks and research methods. This post-modern view, that science can be many different things executed in many ways, has led to establishment of new research fields and subjects which claim their positions in the academic world and in the scientific arena. These fields and subjects have no direct connection to older established academic tradition. As a researcher in such a new field, I have struggled to understand its position in the academic world and have seen the same struggle in my colleagues and fellow researchers. During my master's year in the subject of Textile History at Uppsala University (Sweden), I took the opportunity to explore this field of research to see if I could get to the core of this struggle and if something could be done about it. I call the field "Practical Research".

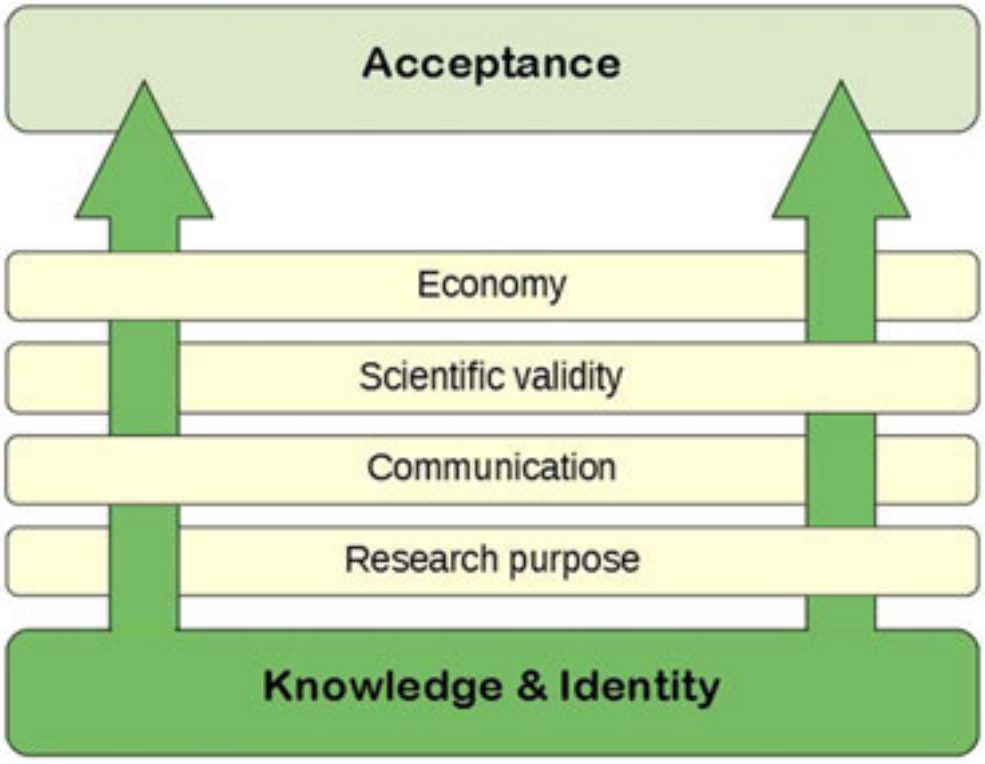
Defining the Field of Practical Research

In the course of this study, there emerged an issue that turned out to be particularly problematic. It involved the lack of defined nomenclature for different actors in the field, for the field itself, and for its context. To start with the context, the nomenclature used here to describe the arena of scientific research covered by the study is the academic world, meaning universities. This means that the entire source material used for the study involves research conducted by researchers who are, or aspire to be, a part of this context. Also, these struggles and problems are to be found in this context. While it is interesting to know if practicians and practical researchers in other contexts have the same experience, this question is not a part of this study.

The field itself is defined by research methods and by the view on the kind of knowledge that can be used in scientific humanistic research in the academic world. All humanistic researchers using practical knowledge, craft knowledge or hands on experience as a base for understanding any kind of source material are a part of the field. This includes Practise-led Research, Practise-based Research, Action Research, Craft Research and Experimental Research, to name a few. The name chosen to cover all these fields is Practical Research, and the researchers are named practical researchers. Practical knowledge is defined by Aristotle's view of the three types of knowledge: *episteme, techné and phronesis*. Practical knowledge corresponds to *techné* (Gustavsson 2004: introduction). The more traditional research within the academic world, i.e. Aristotle's *episteme* (*ibid.*: introduction), is here named Theoretical Research and the persons conducting it - theoretical researchers. It was important to provide their definitions in order to understand and discuss the problems practical researchers experience within the academic world, since - as this study will show - the problems are found at the meeting points of these two academic traditions, the practical and the theoretical.

Building an Understanding – Creating a Theory

Since this study aims at understanding a not so well defined field from within and at subsequently presenting this understanding in a way that can be useful for the persons in



1. A visual model of the Grounded theory of *Acceptance: Practical research in an academic context*
1. Визулни модел Утемељене теорије: практична истраживања унутар академског света

the field, the choice of Grounded Theory (GT) as a research tool was obvious. GT works well for both defining a field and picking up what is important for people within that field. It has the power to show articulated and unarticulated problems, and to conceptualize these into a concrete theory of problems and solutions.

This study begins with the subject of Textile History and then follows the method of theoretical sampling. This means that the developing theory controls further sampling of data. As the study developed, the borders of the Swedish field of Practical Research broadened to include some researchers from Norway and Denmark (and some other countries) as well. The total of 37 different texts have been used to develop the theory; other texts offered no additional information about the field at the time. The core category of the developed theory, i.e. the main issue within the field, which informs us about practical researchers' struggles and problems within the academic world, is best summarized by the term *Acceptance*. This is both the problem and the solution, which makes it the core category of the theory. The category conceptualizes the main issue, but does not really discuss concrete solutions to the problem. Detailed understanding of the field calls for several substantive categories. These show ideas and actions within the field, and are used here as a concrete part of the model working towards the solution to the problem in the core category. These substantive categories are *Economy, Scientific Validity, Communication* and *Research Purpose*. In addition to these, there is one last category of general importance for the model, which enables further understanding of the deeper concerns and the context of practical research within the academic world. This category is *Knowledge in Practice – Identity of the Practical Researcher*. It works as a theoretical framework weaving together the four substantive categories.

The theory is presented as a text discussing the content of the categories and the theory. The categories are used as headlines, starting with the core category Acceptance. It is important to remember that the theory is a conceptualization of the content found in the source material, and not a description. Where specific parts of the theory are more closely connected to particular texts in the source material, these are cited in the text. At the end of this article, the theory is summarized and shown as a visual model (Figure 1). The cited source material can be found in the list of references, whereas other sources are listed in the section *Sources Not Cited in the Text* below.

Acceptance

The category *Acceptance* is the main concern of the researchers working in the field of Practical Research and thus also makes it the core category of the theory. Within the field of Practical Research, discussions mostly deal with practical knowledge, or craft knowledge, in one way or another. A

particularly important topic involves the manner in which this kind of knowledge can claim an accepted position within the academic world. Therefore, the category *Acceptance* offers both a definition of the problems seen in the source material and their solution. Part of the problem lies in the difficulties to communicate practical knowledge to other parts of the academic world and engage larger scientific community. As it fails to do so, practical research does not reach the same level of acceptance as the more traditional theoretical research does. The solution lies in raising awareness and understanding of practical research as a scientific research method, and in strengthening its acceptance.

Knowledge in Practice – Identity of the Practical Researcher

The theoretical category of *Knowledge in Practice – Identity of the Practical Researcher*, shortened to *Knowledge & Identity*, is visible throughout the entire source material. As such, it is closely connected to the problems and solutions within the core category. This is also the category that weaves the substantive categories together and connects them to the core category. The substantive categories of *Economy, Scientific Validity, Communication*, and *Research Purpose* then act as integrated hypotheses, which, along with the understanding of *Knowledge & Identity,* can help resolve the concerns within the field, namely, how to increase the acceptance of Practical Research within the academic world.

The standpoint that knowledge originate from the human intellect is clear amongst practical researchers (Almevik 2011a: 156-75; Holmberg 2015: 227-40; Sjömar 2011: 63-86). It is also clear that the knowledge gained by craftmanship and hands on experience is difficult to communicate, especially in a written context and to someone not experienced in this field of practice. What is most interesting is the unified position that knowledge gathered from practical experiences is as abstract, intelligent and qualified as theoretical knowledge. Many practical researchers do not accept a quite common belief that practical knowledge is based on intuition and that it represents only a tacit knowledge of the performer of the very act. Similar to the theoretical researcher, the practical researcher does not write down or explain every part of his or her thought process. However, if needed, both processes can be verbalised, since both kinds of knowledge are parts of the human intellect. This also means that the theoretical and practical researcher can be the same person (Almevik 2011a: 156-75; Lassen 2014). The reason for prolonged mystification of crafts and practical knowledge and their consideration as a special form of knowledge could lie in the fact that, at the moment of their description, the persons describing them were theoretical researchers without the knowledge of these crafts. The theoretical researchers was thus unable to see and understand the thought process behind every step of a practical act. Planning, execution, analysis and reflection, understanding, new planning and so forth, are steps that can constitute a practical process. Therefore, differences as compared to theoretical researcher's hermeneutic cycles are not that big (Berggren Torell and Ranglin 2014). What possibly distinguishes a practical from a theoretical researcher are the thinking tools. A practical researcher needs his or her physical tools and materials and needs to see what happens at the meeting point of a tool and material in order to complete the thought process – the hermeneutic circle. A theoretical researcher uses other tools to complete these steps (Høgseth 2007). But regardless of the tools, the same type of thought process is used in both cases, and if both the theoretical and the practical researcher can explain this process to others, then both kinds of knowledge should be measured on the same scale.

In the field of Practical Research, it is obvious that different understanding – for example, of an object – and seeing the full context are important. If only one angle of incidence is used in a research project, the result will be biased. One researcher alone seldom has the ability to fulfil all roles needed in a research project. Therefore, it is of utmost importance for researchers to cooperate within and between the fields. Research in general benefits from good communication, research networks and acceptance of different kinds of knowledge and research methods. This particularly applies to research in Material Culture and Applied Arts, where practical researchers with a knowledge of crafts could give their contribution through understanding and interpretations which are directly related to materials, production processes and user context (Aneer 2015: 199-224; Ciszuk 2003; Hammarlund and Vestergaard Pedersen 2007: 213-19). The practical researcher can "read" an object and through such knowledge engage in a dialogue with the original producer or craftsperson, regardless of the time passed (Jarefjäll 2016; Lassen 2014; Medbo 2016). This dialogue can only be expressed in the language of the object, a language of tool marks, of material combinations, of touch of hands, and more. These details remain unknown and unseen by researchers without practical knowledge. Furthermore, the ability to put these small pieces of information together and fill in the gaps with their own knowledge are the skills that make the practical researcher a key person in some research contexts. This is at least true if the risk of missing important information is to be avoided.

The identity of the practical researcher is closely connected to the knowledge in practice. Who is the practical researcher? In many cases an unknown figure. In the academy the craftsperson is often more visible than the practical researcher. In many cases the craftsperson is a sought-after collaboration partner and as such is given a high status, provided that they stick to their craft and practical work, leaving scientific theoretical work to the theoretical researcher. The craftsperson is often called in as an expert and is encouraged to share his or her knowledge, later to be ignored in the theoretical part of the research (Almevik 2006: 84-122; Ciszuk 2003; Høgseth 2007). Therefore, research based on the practical knowledge obtained from the craftsperson, explained by the theoretical researcher often misses out the explanations of the kind of knowledge used for interpretation, as well as references to the actual craftsperson. Discussions of the fact that the actual craftsperson lack the ability to describe the practical process in theory are not rare. The fact that the same could be true the other way round,

namely that theoretical researchers lack the correct knowledge to understand and describe a craft process, is more seldom discussed. Therefore, the status gained by craftspersons in the academic field only seems to be applicable when they are mentioned in general and not as specific individuals in specific contexts. Furthermore, such status does not seem to apply to practical researchers. It can be concluded that practical researchers' status within the academic world is ambivalent.

Just as practical knowledge is distinguished from theoretical in the theory of science (Gustavsson 2004: 5-19), craftspersons/practical researchers are most often distinguished from theoretical researchers. Of course, such distinction is fair if it involves different persons with different education and expertise. However, it is certainly unfair to give them and their knowledge different status. Such view on practical knowledge makes it easier to understand that being integrated as an accepted part of the academic world is a troublesome endeavour for practical researchers, especially considering the fact that half of these researchers' knowledge is undervalued and seen as something merely fascinating, but not scientifically viable.

Economy

The category *Economy* is a substantive category. Discussions about economy involves what costs money and how value and success are measured within academic knowledge and research areas.

The overall topic within this category involves economical resources for research, or even more the lack of them. Practical research is often more resource-demanding than traditional theoretical research. The reasons for this involve time-consuming processes, as well as the cost of materials. Owing to this, practical research projects are often completed as collaborations between the academic world and, for example, museums or the cultural heritage sector. These collaborations are both positive and necessary to achieve relevant and interesting results. However, problems may arise when collaboration partners enter the projects with different economic conditions (Almevik 2011a: 156-75). Practical researchers often experience economic disadvantage and must therefore prioritize the aspects of their research according to their importance. Decision regarding the importance of these aspects is brought by collaboration partners with better economic situation. The category *Scientific Validity* discusses the fact that almost all research projects aiming at development of new theories and methods are found undesirable in these kinds of collaborations. Other projects where similar goals are under-prioritized are the so-called public projects, which are often conducted in collaboration with museums to create exhibitions. In this case, project success is predominantly measured by the number of museum visitors, and not by scientific results of research. It can be concluded that while collaboration is good, it sometimes contributes to practical research undertaken on unsatisfying scientific levels or for unsatisfying purposes. This in turn leads to stagnation or even decline of acceptance from the rest of the academic world. Possible consequences involve the fact that less and less economic resources are allocated to practical research, with the field becoming stuck in a downward spiral.

One reason why practical researchers and practical knowledge should become a part of the academic world rests on the fact that several of the old crafts are endangered and might soon be lost, since they are not practiced anymore. Preservation of this knowledge requires its institutionalization. Otherwise, the responsibility is handed over to individuals still practicing the craft, individuals depending on selling their products on the open market. Therefore, trade, demand and consumption are the forces that determine whether the knowledge of a craft should be preserved or not (Almevik 2003:42-50; Almevik 2011b: 39-48; Høgseth 2007). In this scenario, craftsmanship developed over centuries could disappear in a single generation. Institutions are also needed for the development of crafts. Just as the preservation of crafts is dependent on market demand, so is their development. Master craftspersons aiming to develop their skills and understanding of a craft can do that only within their profession, where production is controlled by the need to earn income more often than by mere curiosity. Sweden has in recent years developed some places within or in collaboration with the academic world, offering craftspersons and their knowledge a sanctuary from the trade. However, resources are often meagre and acceptance by the rest of the academic world is experienced as faltering.

Scientific Validity

The most important discussion regarding this substantive category involves the need for better theories and methods within the field of Practical Research, and the need to anchor them in the overall scientific community. The discussion is divided into two main parts. The first part involves practical researchers' desire to develop practical research methods and theories. The second part rests on a belief that if practical research was anchored in the context of scientific theory, it would be a lot easier to reach a status of acceptance for Practical Research within the academic world.

Practical researchers themselves focus on the need for larger number and better scientific quality of methods used in the field of Practical Research (Almevik and Melin 2015: 72-102; Hammarlund 2005: 87-119; Høgseth 2007). Such desire is above all driven by belief that research could be more effective and results would show higher scientific quality if researchers did not have to develop their own methods, which is often the case today. It is clear that methods should be developed by practical researchers themselves, as a part of practical research projects and collaboration projects. The problem lies in creating opportunities for method-creating research. Practical research is costly and often executed through collaboration projects where the main goal seldom involves method creation and instead focuses on telling and visualizing history for museum audience or on reconstructing or recreating objects. The issue is therefore an economic one and is more thoroughly discussed within the above mentioned category. Discussions about creation of theories for practical research are partly similar, revolving around the issue of finding resources for

research projects chiefly aiming at practical research theory development. The difference lies in the fact that it remains unclear that practical researchers should be the ones developing these theories, which is accompanied by the lack of any further discussion on who should be better equipped to do that. It is, however, clear that theories are needed both for the Practical Research itself and for the process of making Practical Research an integrated, accepted part of the academic world. Nevertheless, the exact types of theories are not mentioned (Almevik 2014: 7-27; Høgseth 2007). Philosophical theories about the definition of practical knowledge already exist. There are also theories about how material culture can be used as a source for understanding of human relations and culture, even though the methods used in this kind of source material are not very helpful to practical researchers. The research presented here leaves me unable to see what types of theories are sought after or where they should be sought.

Communication

Just like the previous categories, namely *Economy* and *Scientific Validity*, this category is also a substantive category. It discusses several aspects of communication, or the lack of it, connecting the category particularly to the category of *Knowledge* & *Identity*.

One of the biggest challenges with this study is contained within this category. It deals with the problem of type of nomenclature that should be used. Some of the terms have been defined earlier in this text, for example, practical knowledge and its synonymous use to Aristotle's *techné*. The term describes a certain type of knowledge, but not the knowledge exclusive to the academic world. Therefore, a need has arisen to find such a word, as well as a word for the person using such knowledge in this specific context. I have chosen to call the persons practical researchers and the field Practical Research. This example proves something that is also apparent in the study's source material, i.e. to be able to speak about ourselves we need to know what we are and we need to be able to explain this to others. And here lies the core question of this category: how do we explain what we know in a way that others can understand and accept? The question is broad and has several layers. If theoretical researchers do not need to specify that something is theoretical knowledge, *episteme*, and that it creates the base for their research, why would practical researchers have to discuss practical knowledge, *techné*? Well, because it is still not an accepted part of the academic world. Practical researchers need to tell what they know, how they got to know it, and why it is important. And this needs to be told in the language spoken and understood by the rest of the academic world, and not in the language of practical researchers. There are already many works on practical knowledge, tacit knowledge and action-based knowledge by academics and philosophers like Bengt Molander, Michael Polanyi, Bernt Gustavsson, and others. These are important to communicate practical knowledge in the field of science philosophy and are used by practical researchers (Aneer 2009; Karlsson 2013). However, this kind of abstract knowledge philosophy is not the problem. The problem practical researchers face with involves communicating the manner in which their knowledge was used in their research in order to understand, analyze and interpret the source material in specific research projects and questions. The discussion partly deals with adapting to the language of the academic world, a written text, but it also deals with the question as to how much the practical researchers should adapt, and how much the theoretical academic world should be willing to learn a new language. And this is important. Most academics agree that tacit knowledge exists, but most of them disagree that it would be impossible to verbalise it if desired (Almevik 2014: 7-27; Berggren Torell and Ranglin 2014: 22-37; Medbo 2016). The question is: how is it possible to verbalise tacit knowledge in a way which would be accepted by the academic world? The fact that its translation to text could pose problems should not be a hindrance to communication. Photo, video, sound, 3D photo, motion capture, notation to describe movements in a craft, or musical notes are examples of different "languages" that could be and already are used, at least in part.

Research Purpose

An important aspect of several categories mentioned above involves an ability to identify contribution of practical knowledge and practical research to science. This is discussed by almost all practical researchers listed in the source material used for this study. Therefore, it has its own category, the fourth substantive category *Research Purpose*. Since the field is quite wide and diverse, the specific purposes of research are also quite different. However, it is possible to distinguish two main areas. One is practical research which involves understanding and developing one's own craft, and the other is the use of practical knowledge to understand other matters, for example a historic social context.

Doing research for the purpose of the very craft itself has already been discussed under the category of *Economy*, and it stresses how difficult it can be for a craftsperson to develop their craft when they are dependent on their own production for their livelihood, which makes them susceptible to market demand and consumption. There is also a problem of preserving craft knowledge no longer demanded by the market, since the places or institutions preserving such knowledge are almost non-existent. Many practical researchers believe that certain kinds of craft knowledge, considered valuable enough to be preserved, must be institutionalized, for example, as a part of the academic world. Such value of craft knowledge is supported by the UNESCO *Convention for Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (2003), with traditional craftsmanship knowledge and techniques being one of its aspects.

Recreation of lost craft knowledge is commonly discussed within the second area. Recreation has several different purposes. One of them involves being able to care for the material cultural heritage, for example, buildings and landscape. Another involves understanding production processes and, as a consequence, understanding people and

social contexts during prehistoric and historic times. In other words, such purpose is identical to the purpose of, for example, historical or archaeological research, although the latter uses different source material and methods. As described, practical knowledge is used to understand something else than the craft itself. However, practical experiments are needed in the research process, either as a method to understand and "read" data from the objects or as a source in case the study focuses on a specific craft process (Hammarlund and Christiansen and Ciszuk 2014: 54-61). It is only briefly discussed that practical knowledge can also be used for deeper understanding of an object or phenomenon, even without physical experiments or reconstructions.

It is easy to conclude that practical research overall has the same purposes as "traditional theoretical" research, i.e. creating new knowledge in a specific area (craft), creating new knowledge to help different parts of society (cultural heritage), or creating new knowledge about prehistoric or historic people, their culture and social context.

Summary and Visual Model

More than anything else, the generated theory about the field of Practical Research in Sweden discusses practical researchers' knowledge, their identity, and importance of acceptance by the rest of the academic world. It also deals with the questions as of how researchers in the field can reach the sought-after level of acceptance. To enable genuine practical research, the field needs to be an accepted part of the academic world. However, currently and over the last 15 years, many practical researchers have experienced lack of acceptance for practical research and its results. If that truly is the case, that the academic world denies full acceptance of the practical field, is not the subject of this study. What this study investigates is the experience of practical researchers, which in itself is an important topic to discuss. Since thoughts about the knowledge of the practical researcher and the identity of the same is ever present in the source material, it is natural that it also becomes the focus of the theory.

The generated theory consists of six categories, all of which are important for practical researchers and practical research in the academic world. The theory can be described as a fabric with the substantive categories *Economy, Scientific Validity*, *Communication* and *Research Purpose* weaved together by the theoretical framework and the category of *Knowledge in Practice – Identity of the Practical Researcher*. This theoretical weave represents a model on how to understand and work with the important core category of the theory – *Acceptanc*e. The theory can be used as a model for understanding the field of Practical Research by both the people who are a part of the field and those who are not. This study explores the Swedish field. However, as any other Grounded Theory, it can be modified, expanded, or used as a base for exploring further or other source material. As such, it can also be useful in the international context. Fields might differ from country to country, but then again they might not. This is left to be discovered by another researchers. Hopefully, this study can offer some help in that respect. Figure 1 presents the theory as a visual model – *Acceptance: Practical Research in an Academic Context*.

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Abbreviations
GT – Grounded Theory

Резиме

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ПОЗИЦИЈА ИСТРАЖИВАЊА ЗАНАТА И ПРАКТИЧНОГ ИСТРАЖИВАЊА УНУТАР АКАДЕМСКОГ СВЕТА: утемељена теорија проблема и решења

Током последњих шездесетак година, област научног истраживања је доживела драматичне промене и развој. Уведени су нови интердисциплинарни теоретски оквири и методе истраживања, који захтевају да добију своје место унутар академског света. Пошто сам и сама део једне од тих нових области истраживања, посматрала сам борбу која се унутар ове области води како би она пронашла своје место у оквиру академског света. Та област је у овом тексту названа „Практично истраживање“ и дефинишу је њене методе истраживања, тј. практично знање, познавање заната и практично искуство као методе које омогућавају разумевање изворног материјала у оквиру научних истраживања у области хуманизма. Кроз оквир Утемељене теорије, у овој студији се истражује та борба унутар области.

У оквиру генерисане теорије о области Практичног истраживања у Шведској, више од било чега другог разматра се знање практичног истраживача, његов идентитет и важност прихватања од стране остатка академског света. Осим тога, разматрају се и питања у вези са начином на који истраживачи унутар области могу да допру до жељеног нивоа прихватања. Генерисана теорија се састоји из шест категорија, при чему су све оне важне за практичне истраживаче и Практично истраживање у оквиру академског света. Ова теорија се може поредити са тканином у којој су основне категорије, наиме *Економија, Научна валидност, Комуникација и Сврха истраживања*, међусобно испреплетане кроз теоретски оквир и категорију *Знање у пракси – идентитет практичног истраживача*. Овај теоретски сплет представља модел за разумевање и за рад са важном средишњом категоријом теорије – *Прихватањем*. Теорију, као модел за разумевање области Практичног истраживања, могу користити како људи који су део поменуте области, тако и они који то нису. У оквиру ове студије се истражује област Шведске, али је и ову, као и било коју другу Утемељену теорију, могуће модификовати, проширивати или користити као основу за даља истраживања или као други изворни материјал. Као таква, може бити корисна и у међународном контексту. Области се могу разликовати од земље до земље, али и не морају. То треба да открије неки нови истраживач, а ова студија му, надам се, у томе бар мало може помоћи.

Превод Драгана Рашић