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**My liminal life: Perpetual journeys across
the research-practice divide**

Laura Empson

Cass Business School, London

laura.empson@city.ac.uk



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Abstract

I develop the theme of liminality to interpret my ongoing journeys across the research-practice divide. My intention is to encourage you to make that journey and to help you avoid the mistakes I have made. I chronicle the creation and evolution of my research centre, the Centre for Professional Service Firms at Cass Business School. I analyse the serious difficulties associated with engaging with practitioners in the current academic environment and explain how the Centre has achieved considerable success in spite of these difficulties. I go on to describe the insights and experiences I have gained from my most powerful experience of impact to date. I conclude by outlining the personal rules I now attempt to live by when engaging with practitioners, to help other academics minimise the difficulties and maximise the opportunities that will arise through these interactions.

Introduction

In 1967, when I was four years old, my family moved to Cyprus, a Mediterranean island divided by centuries of conflict between the Greeks and the Turks. During the week we lived in our large house in the capital city of Nicosia in the Greek Zone. At the weekend we travelled to our small cottage in the fishing village of Kyrenia in the Turkish Zone. Only a few people on the island were able to travel between the two embattled zones, but my father's senior diplomatic status gave us an "access all areas" pass.

Every Friday evening, as dusk began to fall, we made the journey. We crossed the Green Line, a zone which separated the Greeks and the Turks, passing through three military check points; inspected first by Greek soldiers, then by United Nations peace keeping troops, and finally by Turkish soldiers. As a little girl on her way to the seaside I was excited but also anxious, as three sets of armed guards examined our diplomatic identity cards carefully before giving us permission to pass. I remember leaving the hot and dusty city where everyone spoke Greek, driving through the mountains as the sun was setting, and arriving at the small fishing village where everyone spoke Turkish. The smells changed, from car fumes, to lemon groves, to fresh fish. And every Sunday evening, we repacked the car and repeated the journey in reverse.

It occurred to me, as I sat down to write this chapter, that I have continued to enact this ritual throughout my career – moving regularly from the world of academia to the

world of practice and back again, excited but anxious, fascinated by both worlds, and never fully belonging to either. I have lived my life in liminal space.

In “My affair with the ‘other’: Identity journeys across the research-practice divide” (Empson, 2013), I outlined the identity struggles I experienced during my evolution into a successful scholar of professional service firms who has maintained a life-long engagement with practitioners. Previous studies of the research-practice divide have remained at the institutionalized level but “My affair with the ‘other’” focused on the causes and consequences of the divide at the individual level.

I outlined my experiences, first as a strategy consultant, then as a PhD student at London Business School, followed by ten years as a member of faculty at the University of Oxford, culminating in becoming a Professor at Cass Business School. Utilizing auto-ethnographic methods (i.e. analyzing my diary entries over several years), I explained how my identity as an academic had been affected by sustained engagement with practitioners through my dedication to researching professional service firms. Applying the metaphor of an affair to my three-year consulting relationship with a leading law firm, I sought to understand my experiences of excitement, affirmation, enjoyment, and escapism, alongside confusion and guilt. Interwoven with this auto-ethnographic analysis, I discussed the more generalizable implications of my experiences, identifying factors which create and exacerbate identity conflict, the experience of identity conflict, and tactics for resolving identity conflict.

In this chapter I pick up where that narrative left off. I analyse my perpetual journeys across the research-practice divide through the concept of liminality in order to conceptualise the space that both separates and connects the worlds of academia and practice. I describe how I have constructed a “dwelling place” in this liminal space through the creation of my research centre, the Centre for Professional Service Firms (CPSF) at Cass Business School. The CPSF is founded on a commitment to conducting rigorous academic research and engaging with practitioners. I explain about my most tangible evidence of practitioner impact to date, my appointment to the Board of KPMG UK as Senior Independent Non-Executive. I conclude by outlining the personal rules I now attempt to live by when engaging with practitioners. My intention, as with “My affair with the ‘other’”, is to encourage fellow academics to cross the research-practice divide, to help them avoid the mistakes I have made, and to enable them to become well-informed travellers - open to new experiences and willing to take risks, but with sufficient insight to ensure those risks are carefully calculated.

Liminality: “Betwixt and between” a dominant space

A dominant space has clear boundaries, and the practices within these boundaries are interwoven with social expectations, routines, and norms (Shortt, 2015). When I was a child I moved between the dominant spaces of the Greek and Turkish Cypriot zones. As an adult I have moved between the dominant spaces of academia and practice. It has been argued by numerous scholars that the social expectations, routines, and norms of these distinct communities are incommensurable (see Bartunek & Rynes, 2014, for an overview of this debate). A series of past Presidents

of the Academy of Management have raised concerns about our crisis of irrelevance as management scholars (Bartunek, 2003; Hambrick, 1994; Huff, 2000). Gulati (2007) has referred to “two tribes on either side of a chasm” (p. 777) when referring to the ongoing hostilities between academics who seek to define themselves in terms of research and those academics who seek to sustain engagement with practice.

A liminal space lies at the boundary of two dominant spaces and is not fully part of either (Dale & Burrell, 2008). In my analogy, the liminal space is the Green Line that separates the Greek and Turkish Cypriots, where the United Nations peacekeepers live. By contrast, the research-practice divide is a “no man’s land” - there are no established communities dwelling in this liminal space. With hindsight I can see how these conditions helped to create the problems I describe in “My affair with the ‘other’”, and the feelings of depression, isolation, anxiety, exhaustion, confusion and guilt I experienced as I journeyed across the research-practice divide. While I could pass freely backwards and forwards between the worlds of academia and practice, I felt isolated and vulnerable, so did not feel that I could come to rest in this liminal space. In my exhausted state I reluctantly came to the conclusion that “I belonged to an outgroup of one, i.e. me” (Empson, 2013, p. 243).

According to Turner (1967, 1982), liminality represents a stage of reflection, part of a coming of age process. The liminar spends time outside society, “betwixt and between”, in order to make a transition from their established social position, or identity, to their new one (Turner, 1982, p. 27). Beech (2011) and others have emphasised that an individual who spends extended periods of time in liminal space

may experience feelings of anxiety and social separation – Jung’s conceptualisation of the dark phase of liminality where one is broken down before being made whole.

But liminal space may also be liberating as it can represent a space for freedom from structural obligations; it is a space where “anything might happen” (Turner, 1982, p. 27). When an individual is obliged to contend with an oppressive dominant space, liminal space can represent a transitory dwelling space that provides a sense of security and an opportunity for escape (Shortt, 2015). In “My affair with the ‘other’”, my engagement with practitioners enabled me to escape from the oppressive dominant space of my situation at Oxford. Talking about my consulting relationship with the law firm, I explain:

“I love doing it. It is fun. It is important. It puts everything else in perspective.

When I am flying back from a meeting with them, nothing at the business school seems to matter.” (Diary note, May 25, 2006, quoted in Empson, 2013)

My experience of liminality as a child was not limited to my time in Cyprus.

Throughout my childhood I lived in five different countries and attended ten different schools. In the process I developed survival skills which would prove extremely valuable in my future academic career. I worked out how to enter an alien environment and quickly identify and assess the norms of interaction and established power dynamics. The skills that stopped me from being bullied as the new British girl in yet another foreign playground have proven useful in my qualitative field work studying the leaders of elite professional service firms. From my earliest years as a PhD researcher I have been able to walk into a research interview with a high status

individual and quickly build the necessary level of trust to enable them to feel comfortable disclosing confidential and highly personal information to me.

My experience of liminality has also taught me how to view the same situation from very different perspectives. So in a research interview I am both myself and not myself. Of course I bring my own subjective preoccupations, concerns, and prejudices into the interview. However, in order to build a rapport, I try to manage my thoughts and feelings so that I can genuinely empathise with the interviewee, regardless of who they are or what they are saying. As they open up to me, it becomes easier for me to see the world as they see it and I no longer have to pretend to be empathetic. But during the interview I am also in a third place, a liminal space, where I am attempting to maintain an objective position, informed by theory and my own reflexivity, in order to develop intellectually valid interpretations and judgments.

I wonder how many academics who have chosen to journey across the research-practice divide have similarly strong experiences of liminality in their past.

Researchers seeking to cross the research-practice divide would do well to examine their own motivations that cause them to do this. The question is not: what makes you want to start the journey? That is the easy part. *The important question is what it is within you that makes you persist?*

Integrating the “other”

In 2007, after ten years on the faculty at Oxford, I was approached by Cass Business School in the City of London and asked to take up a position specially created for me as Professor in the Management of Professional Service Firms. They asked me to establish my own research centre, dedicated to researching professional service firms. One of Cass's strategic objectives was to become "a leading intellectual resource for professional service firms" (note the use of the words "resource for" – the intention was explicitly functional). I would be in the heart of Europe's financial centre, surrounded by the global headquarters of many of the world's leading professional service firms.

The Dean had previously been an investment banker and championed the professional service firm agenda and my work with great enthusiasm. He told me that I had a "blank sheet of paper" to decide how best to advance this initiative.

From the start I was determined that the Centre would embody a commitment to conducting rigorous academic research and to engaging with professionals at all stages in the research process: from inception, design, execution, dissemination, and application. But I was also clear that it would always be us, the academics, who actually did the research – we would decide what to research and how to research it. So, shortly after I arrived at Cass, on what was literally a blank sheet of paper, I wrote the following:

The Cass Centre for Professional Service Firms:

- A place where academics make a difference - the Centre conducts rigorous research that aims to change the way that academics and professionals analyse and understand professional service firms.
- A place where professionals come to think - the Centre provides professionals with space and stimulus to explore the management challenges they face.
- A place where academics and professionals collaborate - the Centre brings academics and professionals together to challenge each other and create new ideas.

As I wrote in “My affair with the ‘other’”, with the establishment of the CPSF “I have inadvertently created my own eclectic referent group to which I can belong” (Empson, 2013, p. 243). I have attracted very high quality PhD, post-doctoral, and visiting scholars from around the world and I have encouraged many of my colleagues at Cass from Organizational Behaviour, Strategy, and Marketing to join. I have also recruited several distinguished retired Global Senior and Managing Partners, Chairmen and Chief Executives, of elite professional service firms to join us as Visiting Professors of Practice.

These senior professionals are typically individuals I have known for many years and whom I have come to respect as *particularly intelligent, intellectually curious, and personally reflexive. These are the crucial qualities I look for and value most highly in the practitioners I seek to work closely with.*

The relationship may begin with an approach from the Chair of a global professional service firm, perhaps asking me to give keynote speech about my research at their

firm's annual partner conference. After the event I remain in touch with them and subsequently ask them to speak at an event I am organising at Cass. Or the relationship may begin with me getting to know them through my research in their firm. Thereafter, we remain in touch. Sometimes I ask them for advice about my research; sometimes they ask me for advice about their firm. Through a series of meetings and lunches over several years we develop a personal relationship. And, once they are due to retire, I "pop the question", asking them to join the CPSF, knowing that they will make a valuable contribution to our work because I have already learnt to value their insights.

For me one of the most personally rewarding aspects of running the CPSF is our monthly research meetings, which resemble "joint interpretation meetings", as described by Mohrman, Gibson, and Mohrman (2001). These bring together our eclectic group of senior professionals, established faculty, and PhD students, to hear an academic colleague present work in progress. We meet every month so we are able to get to know each other well and learn how to communicate effectively with each other. More generally we just have fun arguing about ideas – practitioners with practitioners, academics with academics, academics with practitioners - until it no longer matters who is what. My vision for the CPSF is validated when I am presenting my own research and a practitioner interprets my data differently through the lens of their own experience, when they ask a question which blows apart my carefully constructed piece of analysis, or see a relationship between two seemingly unconnected pieces of data I have presented, and offer me an explanation for the mechanism that connects them.

In terms of what other members of the CPSF get out of these meetings, Table 1 includes some of my colleagues' comments.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

We have now raised many hundreds of thousands of pounds in prestigious research grants from research councils. One of the factors contributing to our success at winning these grants is our evidence of successful dissemination of our research and of engagement with academics and practitioners. We have organised an extensive programme of research-focused events, including academic symposia, early career researcher masterclasses, and practitioner discussion forums. At these discussion forums we present our emerging findings to a special invited audience of 100-150 senior professionals and invite Managing and Senior Partners, Chairmen and Chief Executives of professional service firms to debate our preliminary conclusions. Our research is improved by these interactions and ensures that our research begins to have an impact several years before it is published in academic journals. The relationships that we build through these events help us to gain access for subsequent research. In this way we have constructed a dwelling place within the liminal space which generates a virtuous circle of both research and practice.

Archetypes of problem practitioners

This book is intended to celebrate and encourage the interaction of academics and practitioners in the production of research that is both rigorous and relevant. But it is important to be realistic about the problems that can arise from these interactions.

One consequence of the success of the CPSF is that each year I receive very many dozens of requests for meetings with practitioners. Whilst I still remain passionately convinced of the value of practitioner interaction, over the years I have learnt to become much more selective about how I interact with them and who I interact with. I have identified four archetypal problem practitioners: the “Very Important Pontificator”, the “Needy Student”, the “Mental Leech”, and the “Singing Siren”. I explain below how I try to identify and respond to each one.

The Very Important Pontificator (VIP) has occupied a senior leadership role in a professional service firm, but is now retiring and looking for new interests (i.e. superficially just like the practitioners I invite to join the CPSF, but crucially different). A VIP might refer to their status as a distinguished retiring professional and suggest a meeting “as an opportunity to explore areas of mutual interest”. Whereas the distinguished professionals in the CPSF are interested in learning alongside the academics, the VIPs are more interested in teaching them. Of course people like this may have a huge amount to offer the CPSF but too often I sense they are using the Centre to gratify their ego needs. A senior professional making a transition into retirement will be going through their own challenging liminal time and looking for new sources of validation. As senior leaders they are used to being listened to by people who want the benefit of their wisdom and they need to find a new group of people to listen to them. A VIP does not understand, and is insufficiently reflexive to learn, that the norms of interaction in academia are very different, and that status is derived not from experience but from the quality of an individual’s thinking. They do not understand why their hard-won insights may be banal or simply irrelevant in the context of our research. The challenge with the VIP is to extract yourself from the

interaction before too much time is wasted and without causing offence to someone who, after all, was offering to help.

The Needy Student may also be coming to the end of, or taking a break from, a successful professional career, but their initial approach will be very different from the VIP. They are likely to talk explicitly about their desire to “collaborate on research”. Rather than seeking to tell me the answer (as the VIP does) they come to me with questions. They are yearning for something they think academia can give to them – their views of academia are often based on their nostalgic memories of undergraduate life. In the early days of the CPSF I was very receptive to these approaches – I was genuinely curious to experiment, to see how these kinds of relationships could contribute to the research life of the Centre. Over time I have realised that, even with the simplest, practitioner-oriented pieces of research, the Needy Student needs a great deal of help to frame their ideas, design their study, analyse their data, and write up their findings. Having created the reputation of the CPSF as an intellectually rigorous research centre, I need to safeguard it. The challenge with the Needy Student is to set expectations clearly up front, help them to recognise that you are not there to help them fulfil their fantasy of becoming an academic, and to explain (briefly) to them how they can negotiate their own path through the maze of academia.

The Mental Leech tends to be attracted by university marketing activities and networking events. Their initial approach they will often include an explicit request to “pick your brains”. They often say they have read about my research, “found it very insightful”, and want to discuss their organization with me. In the early days of the

CPSF my response might have been: flattered that they liked my research, excited that they thought it might be helpful to them, and hopeful that this might translate into some kind of valuable opportunity. But the Mental Leech is a voracious feeder and is not willing to offer anything of value in return. A Mental Leech will always charge their clients for their time, yet assumes that academics will happily provide detailed advice for the price of a coffee. The challenge with the Mental Leech is working out how to distinguish them from valuable opportunities and how to keep them at bay, without undermining the goodwill that the university marketing activities have sought to generate.

The call of the Singing Siren can be heard from many different directions, such as university PR departments, executive education, journalists, and professional conference organisers. But they all sing the same song. They want you to speak about a particular topic of interest to practitioners and their assumption is that, because you have done a great deal of research into Topic A, you must be able to speak with authority on Topics B and C - after all, B and C are very close to A. It is important that we academics have the intellectual creativity to work out how to apply our hard-won insights in novel and interesting ways to new topics. But at what point do you stop being an authoritative expert on a topic and become a “rent a gob”? Some years ago my (practitioner) Dean asked me to give a talk on “the future of the legal profession” to a law firm he was keen to cultivate. I was reluctant to do this as I had not done any research specifically on the topic but explained that, if I spent a few days preparing, I could probably come up with something interesting to say. “What fee was the firm offering?”, I asked. “None”, said the Dean, as it was a marketing activity so I should not spend much time preparing my speech. He

emphasised, “You should learn to develop a Laura Empson lite”. My response was: “There is no Laura Empson lite. *That’s the whole point.*” I pointed out that the reason the law firm wanted to hear me speak was because they knew my reputation as a researcher and believed I would have something significant to say. As I did not have something significant to say, I refused to give the talk. Learning how to say “no” convincingly, courteously and constructively to Singing Sirens is an important skill to cultivate - I am still working on it.

“Acts of pain”

Van Gennep (1961) describes liminality as the destructive stage in a rite of passage. According to Thomassen (2006), the liminar initiands “live outside their normal environment and are brought to question their self and the existing social order through a series of rituals that often involve acts of pain” (p. 322). What takes place in the dark phase of liminality is a “process of breaking down...in the interest of making whole one's meaning, purpose and sense of relatedness” (Shorter, 1988, p. 73). Just as the CPSF was becoming successful and well-established, something like this happened to me.

By 2011 I had been at Cass for four years and had invested a huge amount of time in establishing the CPSF. I had helped to achieve one of Cass’s strategic goals to become globally recognised as a centre of excellence for professional service firms. I had also secured a substantial grant from the Economic and Social Research Council of Great Britain to conduct my own research into leadership dynamics and was deeply immersed in field work among the senior leadership groups of a series of

elite PSFs. I had consistently received top ranking on my appraisals but, in the midst of everything else I was doing, I had not had time to publish much. This was not a particular concern to the Dean or my Head of Faculty as they shared my commitment to practitioner engagement and recognised that the publications would come after I had completed my field work for the ESRC study.

Then everything changed and, within a short space of time, the university got a new Vice Chancellor, the business school got a new Dean, and I got a new Head of Faculty. This coincided with the run up to the REF (Research Excellence Framework), an exercise held every six years by the UK government to assess the quality of research at UK universities. Under the REF, universities need to justify the public funding allocated to them by providing evidence that funds spent have met the three E's of economy, efficiency, and effectiveness (Martin, 2011). This is part of the "regime of excellence" (Butler & Spoelstra, 2014) manifested in journal rankings and research assessments which is coming to increasing prominence in universities more generally. In the UK each participating university is required to submit an extremely detailed "return". The quality of these submissions is then assessed by an external panel. The REF panel award a score to each university department; the higher the aggregated score for the university, the more income awarded by the government for the following six years.

The REF process is highly controversial (Tourish, 2015). "The content and quality of a piece of work is less important for the purposes of evaluation than its performance according to purely quantitative criteria" (Butler & Spoelstra, 2014: p 538). Willmott (2011), himself a REF assessor and highly distinguished scholar, has referred to the

“journal list fetishism and the perversion of scholarship” (p 430), that has arisen in this environment.

The university decides which individual faculty to submit to the REF based on the number and quality of their publications. Faculty who are not submitted are deemed “non-REFable”. In the run up to the REF deadline many UK universities engage in a frenzy of recruiting, similar to football’s annual transfer market window (Lucas, 2006), as they outbid each other for “star” publishers (Clarke, Knights, & Jarvis, 2012).

Thomassen (2006) says that, through their “acts of pain”, liminars “come to feel nameless” (p. 322). During the run up to the REF I felt that, from the university’s perspective, my 20 years of scholarly endeavour had been reduced to a single number, my REF score.¹ What I experienced during this time was fairly widespread amongst UK academics, as many universities attempted to increase their REF ranking by “easing out” or “culling” faculty who were not “REFable”, or forcing them to transfer to teaching-only contracts. Academic identities, which are inherently insecure (Gabriel, 2010), were rendered ever more fragile by the proliferation of increasingly stringent performance demands and penalties for underperformance (Knights & Clarke, 2014).

Within a short space of time, I shifted from being a star performer to a “question mark” as I did not yet have the required number of high quality publications to be

¹ At my university, this calculation is based on a faculty member’s four “best” publications over the six year REF period, multiplied by the value accorded by the ABS (Association of Business Schools) to the journals in which they were published.

included in my department's REF submission. I was told by the new regime that I should focus all my attention on achieving the necessary number of top ranked publications and should "stop wasting your time" on practitioner engagement². The anxiety that ran throughout "My affair with the 'other'", suddenly returned. In the environment of the REF, where my employing institution had become an increasingly oppressive dominant space, the liminal space that I had created no longer seemed secure. After years of practice at refusing to relinquish my British identity in yet another foreign playground, I should have been able to resist my employer's pressure to conform. But the bloody-minded determination that had enabled me to stand up to playground bullies when I was a child, simply deserted me when I was confronted with the institutionalised bully embodied in the REF. During the next 18 months, in order to make myself REFable, I worked harder and on a more sustained basis than at any time in my life. Towards the end of this time I experienced a double bereavement: the sudden death of my father and the rapid onset of my mother's dementia.

Mourning is another form of liminal space and I learnt an extraordinary amount during this bitter time of trial. This "process of breaking down" (Shorter, 1988) forced me to ask profound questions about my life. I was certain that a life devoted primarily to the production of REFable publications would be a sad and worthless waste. In the immediate aftermath of my father's sudden death, and of learning to

² The 2014 REF included a section on "Impact" where universities were invited to submit Impact Case Studies, outlining how particular pieces of published research had had an impact on organization, society, and the economy more generally. Due to the vagaries of the REF rules I was prevented from submitting an Impact Case Study, in spite of the fact that my research had had significant impact in many organizations, because the research had been published while I was at Oxford and could not, therefore, be included in an Impact Case Study for Cass Business School.

care for my mother, I realised that my life was short and could end at any moment, so I might as well do whatever I wanted, and do it right now. I realised also that it made no sense whatsoever to comply with institutionally-prescribed performance metrics because they could change overnight with the arrival of a new university Vice Chancellor or a new Minister of Education. What really mattered to me was the thrill of intellectual discovery, of learning and growing intellectually, of creating and crafting research insights, and of using those insights to make a positive difference in the lives of the people I cared about: professionals, fellow researchers, my students, and myself.

And around the time I came to this conclusion, my fourth paper was accepted into a top ranked journal and I became REFable. “My affair with the ‘other’” was one of the publications that helped me to achieve this goal.

“Making whole”

During the run up to the REF I turned down many professional service firms’ requests for help as I needed to focus on developing my publications. However, I was intrigued when the Chairman of KPMG UK, one to the “Big Four” global accounting and advisory firms, asked me to join their Board as an Independent Non Executive (INE) and member of their Public Interest Committee³.

³ According to the UK’s Audit Firm Governance Code, the largest UK accounting firms are required to appoint independent non-executives. Their role is to safeguard the public interest. As these firms are partnerships, INEs are not technically board directors, but their roles are very similar in other respects. The key distinction is that they have an expanded accountability to stakeholders rather than to shareholders (i.e. the public rather than simply the partners of the firm).

As with my childhood trips to the Turkish Zone, I approached the opportunity with a mix of excitement and anxiety. The other three INEs at KPMG and their equivalents in the other major accounting firms were highly experienced practitioners (I would be the only academic amongst this august group). Most were already serving on the boards of major publicly quoted corporations and many had worked as corporate Chairman or very senior civil servants. Most were ten to twenty years older than I, and many of them had knighthoods, reflecting their status as part of the “great and the good” of the British Establishment. I had felt like an outsider all my life so I could not conceive of myself as becoming one of “them”.

After three years of serving on the Board as an independent non-executive I have come to realise that my lack of experience in many key areas is more than compensated for by two decades of studying and advising professional service firms on leadership and governance. My experience of liminality, a long-standing feature of my academic life, has prepared me perfectly for the *ultimate liminal role* of the non-executive director.

We participate in Board meetings, advise the Executive of the firm, and hold them to account. I also act as an informal sounding board to members of the Board. Our remit under the Audit Firm Governance Code explicitly encompasses the “public interest” and, in that capacity, we have particular responsibility for oversight of risk and quality issues within the firm. We meet regularly with the audit sector’s regulator, the Financial Reporting Council (FRC), to discuss KPMG’s activities in the context of public interest issues, and we also meet periodically with institutional investors.

Put in these terms, the work sounds rather dry and dull. It isn't. It is hard work and sometimes stressful, but it can also be fascinating and fulfilling.

I remember sitting in my first KPMG Board meeting with my hand over my mouth as I struggled to control the broad grin that kept spreading across my face. The Board members were looking very serious and I needed to look like one of them, but I was feeling utterly gleeful as I felt intellectual fireworks going off inside my head. One agenda item after another was connecting with the past 20 years of my research and I could feel ideas and insights bubbling up inside me. I had presented many times before at the Board meetings of other professional service firms but this experience felt entirely different. I was no longer simply an invited guest, visiting temporarily, but someone who had a right to be there, with significant ongoing responsibilities to the firm and the public interest.

Jung talks about the experience of liminality as a necessary precursor to “making whole’ one's meaning, purpose and sense of relatedness” (Shorter, 1988, p. 73). My role at KPMG has helped me to achieve that. It has provided me with a strong and alternative sense of affiliation and identity.

As an insider/outsider, the role of the independent non-executive is inherently liminal and very complicated in identity terms. On the one hand we must remain outsiders, in order to provide independent challenge and perspective - i.e. KPMG are “them”. On the other hand, we need to become insiders if our voices are to be heard,

understood, and respected⁴ - KPMG are “us”. In Board meetings I think carefully about when to say “we” and when to say “you”, depending on what I am trying to achieve with my comment (i.e. whether I want to gently build support or to provoke and disturb). Our insider/outsider status enables the INEs to offer very robust challenge, to say things which are simply too difficult to articulate for people who have worked in the firm their entire careers.

My role at KPMG maps directly onto my current research into senior leadership dynamics but it also relates back to my previous research on governance in professional service firms. I participated in a meeting a while back where the Financial Reporting Council was proposing substantial revisions to the Audit Firm Governance Code. There were about twenty people sitting around a large table, including representatives of the regulator, the professional association, government, the largest accounting firms, their INEs and investors. Having published on institutional work in a professional context, I sat there thinking “Wow! This is institutional work, happening right in front of my eyes”. And when the Chief Executive of the FRC turned to me and said, “Laura, given your research on professional service firm governance, I am particularly interested to hear your views on the proposals”, I thought “Wow! This is me *doing* institutional work”.

My Cass and KPMG identity cards give me “access all areas” to two very different spaces and I have learnt to move easily between them over the course of a single day. *I perform both roles better, precisely because I am performing both roles.* After

⁴ Partnerships are notoriously insular and resistant to outsider influence (Empson, Cleaver, & Allen, 2013).

two years as an INE I was asked to take over as the Chair of the Public Interest Committee (to be become in effect the Senior Independent Non-executive Director) of KPMG. This has opened up a new phase of learning for me and new opportunities to have a positive impact. Turner argues that, at the conclusion of an enforced period of reflection, the liminar finds that they have acquired enhanced responsibilities and “powers”. My time of “pain” in liminal space and my new-found responsibilities at KPMG have indeed given me enhanced “powers”, by enabling me to operate with a greater degree of insight, confidence, and effectiveness in the realms of both academia and practice.

Rule of engagement

My aim in writing this chapter has been to encourage academics to keep crossing the research-practice divide. As with any form of adventure travel, the key is to prepare carefully, educate yourself about the risks, and to be open to what you may discover about yourself and the world along the way. Below are the rules of engagement which I have developed to enable me to do this. These are personal to me and I encourage you to develop some rules which work for you.

1) It is about them not us – they are not objects but individuals

When we approach practitioners as people rather than as research objects, the quality of the data we gather is immeasurably improved. Here are two examples from my recent experience of how academics objectify practitioners and why this can undermine the quality of our research. First, an academic asked me recently: “How can I get a gig like yours at KPMG? I would love to sit at their Board table and

observe those lab rats in their natural environment.” I explained that this was precisely why he would not be invited to join the Board of any organization. If he ever wanted to get close enough to Board members to study them properly, then he needed to stop thinking of them just as research objects and recognise that they were also individuals struggling to do their jobs to the best of their ability. Second, a PhD student told me recently about a series of elite interviews she had conducted where she had “messed up” because she had been overwhelmed with anxiety by the seniority of the professionals she was interviewing. I suggested that most interviewees, no matter how senior, will assume that someone studying for a PhD is more intelligent than they are and may be worried about their own ignorance or inadequacies being revealed in a research interview. I encouraged her to try to empathise with her interviewees, to lose sight of her own insecurities as she tapped into theirs, to encourage them gently to relax and enjoy themselves as they opened up to her.

2) Learn to spot time wasters and users – and work out how to say “no” to them

I am always acutely aware that an hour wasted with the wrong practitioner is an hour I could have spent on research. Earlier in this chapter I explained how I try to spot time wasters and users so I will not say more here.

3) Always build in opportunities to learn something new – and remember to shut up and listen

At the end of a day speaking to practitioners I sometimes wonder - if my commitment to engagement is genuine, then why do I feel used up? Why do I feel as though I

have “given away” my expertise and have “received” nothing in return? When we have something that other people want, and which we want to share, how do we replenish ourselves intellectually? Every academic who wants to engage seriously with the world of practice needs to develop answers to these questions. I make it a rule, for example, that whenever I agree to give a speech to a professional service firm, I conduct a series of interviews with organizational members beforehand. This enables me to tailor my material directly to their concerns, and ensures that my speech has considerably greater impact. It also means that I am learning even as I am lecturing. By saying “no” to the majority of requests I receive for public speaking, I limit the amount of time I spend in “broadcast” mode and make sure I spend plenty of time in “receive”.

4) Only agree to speak or offer advice where you have a deep expertise – and ruthlessly protect your academic legitimacy

The professionals I choose to work with are as intelligent and expert as I am in their chosen field and are an exceptionally demanding audience. Some years ago, as a way of overcoming my profound anxiety about public speaking, I made it a rule to only agree to speak to practitioners about topics where I was one of the world’s leading authorities. Anyone with a PhD is by definition the world’s leading authority on *something* and our academic careers are essentially a project in expanding the range of areas in which we can legitimately claim a unique expertise. The more we engage with practitioners, and the more we come to be seen as authorities with interesting things to say, the more we will be asked to talk outside our area, to oversimplify our message, to eliminate the nuances of our argument, and to tell

practitioners what they want to hear. We are under pressure to become “public intellectuals” but I believe strongly that the word “intellectual” should always take precedence over the word “public”. We should always be wary that our desire to engage with practitioners does not lead us to undermine our credibility as academics. Practitioners believe what we say because they assume we know what we are saying. It is important we do not betray that trust.

5) Never do research for money – always charge well for consulting

I have always funded my research through research council grants and have never done contract research for organizations, or allowed a firm I am studying to pay my expenses. Because of the rigorous professional training I received in my previous career as a management consultant, I take the consultant/client relationship very seriously and maintain a clear separation between the services I offer my clients and the data I gather from my research sites. The power relationships between consultant/client and researcher/research site are entirely different and, I believe, incommensurable. As a consultant, I am there to serve the client; as a researcher, the research site is there to serve the research. As a consultant, any insights I develop are confidential to the client; as a researcher, any insights I publish are a “public good”. When working as a consultant, it is important to value yourself, to charge accordingly, and to be prepared to walk away from a lot of work that comes your way. Tacit knowledge is notoriously difficult to value and professionals use a variety of tactics, including pricing, to convince their clients that they have knowledge that is worth paying for. If we do not value the insights we offer practitioners, we cannot expect practitioners to value them either.

Conclusions

It is easy for academics to devalue ourselves. We are required to submit to a relentless stream of increasingly intrusive and largely meaningless performance metrics, critiqued and rejected by anonymous colleagues through the peer review process, and subjected to continuous cuts in funding and administrative support. As we are deprofessionalised, it is easy to internalise this deprofessionalisation (Knights & Clarke, 2014) and to see ourselves as just another group of wage slaves, no different from the practitioners we are studying. But to practitioners we *are* different. Academics know that a PhD student is at the bottom of the academic food chain and that the status of Professors has been substantially devalued in recent years, but to practitioners a PhD student is an exceptionally clever individual and a Professor is someone who has scaled the heights of an erudite profession. Both academics and practitioners are correct.

While I would never advocate academic arrogance, I do think it is important for us to remember that our academic status lends weight and authority to what we have to say. Practitioners may object to our “ivory towers” and “academic navel gazing”, but the strength of their criticisms reflects their disappointment in us. They want us to be wise and insightful, to have the answers to the questions that beset them, and are frustrated and resentful when we fail them.

As many of the contributors to this book makes clear, academia is beginning to change. In the next REF, an increasing proportion of a university’s ranking will be

based on Impact Case Studies which will outline the impact of selected academics' research on practitioners. My work with KPMG and the FRC represents an ideal Impact Case Study. By enhancing the research ranking of my university under the REF, my engagement with practitioners should translate directly into substantial government funding for my institution. My relationship with my university has come full circle.

The nature of liminal space between research and practice is, therefore, changing. Academics who choose to journey backwards and forwards between the worlds of research and practice may continue to do so alone, but we are now more aware of our fellow travellers. This book in itself represents a dwelling place in the liminal space of the research-practice divide where we can "hang out" with like-minded colleagues engaged in similar journeys. However, we still have a long way to go before our endeavours become legitimised. Being invited to write a chapter for this book is an honour and a pleasure, but it does not "count" in terms of my university's performance metrics. To quote my earlier performance appraisal, it is "a complete waste of time". We must never lose sight of the importance of continuing to publish in "legitimate" academic journals.

Recently the CPSF established an alliance with Harvard Law School's Center on the Legal Profession and I have become a Senior Research Fellow at Harvard. This opens up a whole new realm of possibilities for research and engagement. As the academic environment starts to change, I hope that more and more researchers, who share a commitment to conducting rigorous research and making a positive

difference to practitioners, will come together and collaborate. If we do so, the possibilities for impact will be infinite.

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TABLE 1

Question: “Given the considerable demands on your time, why do you continue to come to CPSF research meetings?”

Senior practitioners

"I love the exposure to new ideas and new ways of looking at things provided by academics who are actually keen to be challenged by non-academics. I always come away from a meeting having learnt something - and I can't say that about every meeting I attend."

"Attending CPSF seminars is one of the most stimulating and satisfying things I get to do. There is a wonderful fusion or synthesis of views, evidence and experience. It feels creative and worthwhile."

"I enjoy the sheer fun of intellectual debate in a multi-disciplinary non-hierarchical group. The CPSF provides a forum where we can constructively analyse and challenge why things happen the way they do, and how they can be done better."

PhD students

"Every time I attend a CPSF meeting I come away with enhanced confidence and restored faith in my chosen career. It allows me to experiment with my changing identity without expecting me to choose sides and be either an academic or a practitioner... . I was always interested in doing a PhD which might improve the lives of (even just a handful of) professionals."

"I really treasure the opportunity to meet with practitioners who have been exposed to different experiences than the academics we doctoral students interact with on a daily basis. The CPSF is an important part of my PhD process - both in providing inspiration, and in validation (or non-validation) of my research ideas."

"It is interesting to observe the reactions of the practitioners to the research, including how they disagree *with each other*"... Regular meetings of the same small group can allow everyone to speak and argue in a 'safe' environment so that bonds can be formed and fledgling ideas can be shared."

Faculty

"I've been a member of quite a few research groups, and this is the first (and only) one in which I've seen such a candid and generative ongoing conversation between academics and practitioners."

"I am attracted by the chance to hear practitioners speak about that which is 'unsayable in public'. I find it interesting and very useful for developing my thinking. The group allows everyone to participate and to get to know each other for a relaxed exchange of ideas rather than for ego-driven debates and disagreements."

“I recognise the difficulty of getting access to and studying professionals in their natural habitat, so it is always fascinating to hear about the ongoing projects of CPSF members. It becomes doubly interesting when deeply experienced practitioners validate and/or question our theoretical analyses and offer their perspectives, which often simplify and clarify the issues we identify.”