

**Expanding the Notion of Dialogic Trading Zones for Impactful Research: The Case of Women on Boards Research**

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### **List of Acronyms:**

WOB: Women on Boards, GEO: UK Government's Equality Office, FTSE: Financial Times Stock Exchange, W2W: Women to Watch, FRC: Financial Reporting Council, FFR: Female FTSE Report, ACCA: Association of Chartered and Certified Accountants, EU: European Union, VCC: Voluntary Code of Conduct, EHRC: Equality & Human Rights Commission, BIS: Business Innovations and Skills, HC: Human Capital

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# **Expanding the Notion of Dialogic Trading Zones for Impactful Research:**

## **The Case of Women on Boards Research**

### **Abstract**

Debates about research impact highlight the importance of involving practitioners in research processes, but are unclear as to how precisely to foster this dialogue. This paper considers how dialogic encounter can be encouraged through ‘trading zones’ where academics and practitioners collaborate. We draw on our experience of conducting research on women on boards for over 15 years to examine (a) how we established and evolved our role within trading zones in this field, achieving impact on policy and business practice, and (b) how we interfaced between trading zones and the academic field, thereby enabling cross-fertilization of ideas between academics and practitioners. We contribute to literature on research impact by empirically examining and critically evaluating the key characteristics of trading zones. First, trading zones are theorized to be action-oriented. Our analysis reveals how multiple stakeholders collectively redefine the action goals, illustrating the need to expand our understanding of relevant ‘practitioners’ beyond managers. Second, we find that durability of trading zones is crucial because it enables gestation of ideas and reframing problems. Third, we problematize the notion of psychological safety in trading zones, arguing that dialogic capability and the pursuit of impact require acceptance of trade-offs and political manoeuvrings.

**Key Words:** Theory and Practice; Dialogic Capability; Trading Zones; Women on Boards; Engaged Scholarship; Research Impact

## Introduction

The impact of academic research on practice (Rynes *et al.*, 2001; Tranfield and Starkey, 1998) and the role of business schools in society (Burchell *et al.*, 2015, Chia, 2014; Thorpe and Rawlinson, 2014) is a long-standing debate, characterized by frequent criticisms of a disconnect between researchers and practitioners (Clegg *et al.*, 2013), and invalid ontological assumptions “that academic theory provides a precedent for practical action” (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2010, p. 1190). While management scholars increasingly recognize the importance of involving practitioners in research processes, how best to foster this dialogue remains unclear. The notion of ‘trading zones’ – spaces where knowledge from disparate communities can be shared and integrated - is one recent conceptualization of how communities with different logics can collaborate (Romme *et al.*, 2015). This paper theorizes about the processes that enable research impact beyond academia, drawing on our research team’s experience of conducting women on boards (WoB) research for over 15 years, and engaging with multiple non-academic stakeholders.

Building on the concept of ‘dialogic trading zones’ (Romme *et al.*, 2015) to conceptualize the process of impactful research, we make three contributions to academic debates about research impact. First, we confirm that trading zones are action-oriented encounters where the relationship between knowledge and practice is not unidirectional (Scherer and Steinmann, 1999) - rather knowledge is co-constructed through evolving engagement with non-academic stakeholders. In our case, this involved redefining problems and solutions in the UK WoB field. However, while Romme *et al.* (2015) imply that managers are ‘the practitioners’ who should co-constitute trading zones with academics, our experience reveals that impact was not generated through direct engagement with a single target audience, but rather through long-term coalitions with multiple change champions in the field (government, policymakers, corporations, media, diversity experts, and women

themselves). Therefore, we demonstrate the need to expand the definition of relevant ‘practitioners’ in trading zones to extend far beyond managers. Second, we argue that trading zones’ durability is crucial to enable idea gestation and problem reframing. In our case, we both directly engaged non-academic stakeholders in trading zones, and interfaced with the scholarly field of WoB to allow cross-fertilization of ideas. Finally, while Romme *et al.* (2015) argue that psychological safety is a necessary feature of trading zones, we problematize this assumption (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2011) and question to what extent this is achievable when interactions with non-academic stakeholders require navigating sensitive political dynamics and trade-offs.

The paper is organized into four sections. First we consider current scholarly debates about impact and introduce the notion of ‘dialogic trading zones’ (Romme *et al.*, 2015). The subsequent two sections outline our research team’s experience of engaged scholarship (Van de Ven and Johnson, 2006), examining how our collaboration with practitioners evolved, and how we enabled cross-fertilization of ideas by reframing issues from micro- to macro level, and by publishing issue-driven research in academic outlets. We then discuss how our analysis evidenced, critically analysed, and extended the concept of dialogic trading zones, adding to the conceptualization of impactful research.

### **‘Trading zones’ for dialogic encounters between academics and practitioners**

For the past 15 years, business schools and scholars have attempted to ‘bridge the relevance gap’ (Hodgkinson *et al.*, 2001; Pettigrew, 1997) by positioning themselves as much closer to practice than traditional universities (Gingham and Clare, 2009; Hodgkinson and Starkey, 2011). However, management academics are frequently criticized for producing knowledge designed for peers and highly-ranked journals, rather than outputs that are

accessible to non-specialists (Starkey and Madan, 2001; Cohen, 2007; Aguinis *et al.*, 2014), thereby relegating practitioners' concerns secondary and 'institutionalising their own irrelevance' (Bennis and O'Toole, 2005, p.100). Many scholars call for a redesign of knowledge production and dissemination (Hodgkinson and Starkey, 2011) to enable closer collaboration between researchers and practitioners (Avenier and Parmentier Cajaiba, 2012; Hodgkinson and Starkey, 2012), particularly during the inquiry process (Radaelli, *et al.*, 2014). MacIntosh *et al.* (2012) propose a dialogic approach, moving away from the simplistic idea of knowledge production (by academics) and consumption (by practitioners). Early stage collaboration and openness helps theoretical and practical forms of knowledge come together in collaborative research (Marcos and Denyer, 2012), although it requires academics to draw on conflicting logics about the knowledge production process (Swan, *et al.*, 2010).

Knowledge co-production is a two-way process that starts with joint problem definition, enabling academics to understand the value of practitioners' procedural knowledge (Marcos and Denyer, 2012; Rousseau, 2012). Romme *et al.* (2015: 544) argue that despite the normative rhetoric of what should be, the "fragmented landscape of management (practice and scholarship)" prevents multiple actors, with their conflicting priorities, from meaningful interaction. So often, there is neither a shared sense of purpose (Rolin, 2010) nor an awareness of being part of a collective 'regime of responsibility' (Goodstein and Wicks, 2007). The divides between practitioners and scholars are clear; what is less clear is how to bridge them.

One suggestion is the creation of trading zones, where communities with disparate logics and motivations can tackle problems with a sense of shared purpose and responsibility (Galison, 1997 in Romme *et al.*, 2015). Trading zones enable dialogic encounters when parties are open to learn from each other, to broaden their own horizons of understanding. To be successful, trading zones must be: (1) action-focused with a desire to shape scholarship

and management practice in a specific field, (2) durable, in the sense of time, often involving industry or public-funded projects, and (3) psychologically safe, yet likely still to be being political (Romme *et al.*, 2015). These spaces are fragile, as all parties must be committed to a shared goal (Marcos and Denyer, 2012) and there are many possible institutional (Romme *et al.*, 2015) and philosophical (Johnson, *et al.*, 2006) barriers that can get in the way of that aim.

Despite opposing logics, scholars and practitioners who recognize a need for change, and share a purpose, responsibility, and interest in particular outcomes can “facilitate productive exchange and dialogue” (Romme *et al.*, 2015, p.547). Within these shared spaces, and following MacIntosh *et al.* (2012), Romme *et al.* (2015, p. 547) propose that “practicing and knowing are co-constitutive, dialogic processes... and management scholars and practitioners alike engage in practicing as well as knowing”. The co-constituted knowledge suggests an iterative process between academics and practitioners who together create shared understanding. A critical first step is to acknowledge and accept that different players bring different standpoints, but are also open to expose themselves to other philosophies, “in the interest of building and sustaining a viable discourse” (Romme *et al.*, 2015, p.548) on the evolution of their subject.

Certainly practitioner insights render academic findings more actionable (Rousseau, 2012); however, precisely how academics engage practitioners raises several concerns. The pursuit of relevance might contradict accepted norms of academic conduct, leading to compromises and trade-offs by limiting the scope of research (Butler *et al.*, 2015). Notions of ‘relevance’, bound up in power and temporality, should not be unproblematically conceptualized as good (Learmonth *et al.*, 2012). Perceptions of relevance are influenced by management fashions, and scholarship is typically labelled as ‘useful’ by business elites, policymakers, or funding bodies who have the power to make such judgments and whose



voice can be heard. Power dynamics and a managerialist focus complicate the pursuit of impact, especially in the case of research with emancipatory aims such as equality and diversity, which seeks to involve those in power to reflect on and challenge their own dominance (Strumińska-Kutra, 2016).

We now examine the possibilities and limits of developing trading zones for impactful research by drawing on our experience as WoB researchers in the UK.

### **Establishing the trading zone, evolving our role in it and creating impact on practice**

This section reflects on the nature of our engaged scholarship and its impact, outlining how the initial (pre-2010) positioning of our research enabled collaborative relationships, reputation building and dialogic encounters with policymakers and practitioners, as well as a sustained focus on a growing research capacity through doctoral students. We then describe how engagement with multiple non-academic stakeholders enabled us to pursue engaged activism from 2010 onwards. Appendix 1 provides a timeline of key events from 2005-2016.

#### *Growth and Reputation building through engaged scholarship (pre 2010)*

In 1999, the research team's senior member was promoted to full professor and invited to set up a research centre on women in leadership (the first in the UK) at her business school. Already an established academic in the field of women in management, she designed the centre to address theory development and practice around the lack of women leaders in organizations, including leadership programmes for women managers. Emancipatory feminist values thus underpinned the centre's work. To promote the centre's work to practitioners, she led an annual census of women directors in UK FTSE 100 companies. These annual reports became known as the Female FTSE Reports (FFRs) and later covered all FTSE 350 firms.

The business school's leadership offered the senior professor one post-doctoral researcher and one year to prove the centre's viability.

Given the limited academic research and public awareness of the issue at that time, the initial team were mindful to produce research findings that would be relevant to managers (Van de Ven, 2007). Academics in the centre worked closely with non-academic stakeholders through funding, high visibility publications, and outreach activities. Following the second FFR, the government publicly committed to reviewing the lack of women leaders in industry. Conversations between the Government Equality Office and centre researchers led to the government becoming a long-standing partner and sponsor, with successive Ministers authoring the foreword to the annual FFRs. The centre researchers were pragmatic and focused on building relationships and 'knowledge networks' (Starkey and Madan, 2001), embracing an aligned, collaborative approach to problem definition, data collection and analysis, and dissemination (e.g. by setting up an advisory group with Diversity Managers from industry, the civil service and private practice). When the centre's research identified a lack of mentors as a barrier to the boardroom, the group instigated a FTSE100 Cross-Company Mentoring Scheme, often described as a breakthrough initiative which evolved into The Mentoring Foundation. The advisory group recognized the need to shift the conversation beyond women professionals to the FTSE Chairs who held the power to instigate change. In 2003, Shell's Chair launched the FFR and engaged other FTSE Chairs in frank conversations about the need for change. In 2004, the UK Trade Minister launched the FFR at Downing Street.

Reflecting back, the senior researcher and post-doctoral researcher played distinct but equally vital roles. The senior researcher had a clear idea to campaign for change, but was part of a neo-liberal business school in which gender in management was seen as a 'niche' subject. She initially ensured strong sponsorship from the Dean and invested considerable

time networking with practitioners and policymakers to engage them with the issue, thereby setting the groundwork for trading zones (Romme *et al.*, 2015). The post-doctoral researcher was a mature individual who invested long hours into writing papers for publication, developed interest in reports with journalists, and took on doctoral students, increasing the centre's research capacity. By 2009, six further mature doctoral students had joined and/or completed their PhDs in related fields that engaged with WoB research, thus purposefully developing research capacity and expertise. The centre now had three generations of doctoral researchers, all of whom had had prior careers in industry or consulting, an additional two of whom had stayed on at the centre post-PhD, and all-but-one sought careers in academia. The centre consciously cultivated positive relationships with journalists at leading outlets such as the *Financial Times* and *Sunday Times*, investing significant time to answer queries and explain issues pertaining to WoB.

At this time, the centre's researchers were not wedded to a single theoretical lens. Sociological theorising on gender was obscure to business practitioners and relatively marginalized in management literature (Grandy *et al.*, 2015). On reflection, the lack of an initial overt theoretical framework eased the centre's admission into business and policymaker communities. In a 2015 meeting with Government Equalities Office (GEO) and Business Innovation Skills (BIS) department senior civil servants, centre researchers received feedback that our long collaboration had been effective *because* we were not wedded to a particular viewpoint and we "listened, made suggestions, and then conducted research as agreed" (personal communication). At the outset, we understood that data had to be deemed 'factual' (descriptive) without being normative to develop evidence-based policies. We thus suggest that at initial stages, impactful research needs to be more 'theoretically agnostic' (Davis and Marquis, 2005, p.334) and issue-driven to engage stakeholders, and then, subsequently, incorporate theorization.

From 2005, we secured joint corporate funding for the annual report and continued support from the government and Opportunity Now, the leading corporate membership organization focused on diversity and inclusion (see Appendix 1). Centre researchers engaged with sponsors to co-determine research agendas (Antonacopoulou, 2009) and identify corporate initiatives for advancing women that could be showcased in forthcoming reports. All subsequent report launches were hosted by FTSE 100 Chairs, with many other FTSE 350 Chairs in attendance. The WoB conversation gained legitimacy as an issue of public debate and action, demonstrated by the willingness of multiple corporate sponsors to put their name to our work. Engagement broadened beyond report launches, and the researchers spoke at numerous professional events in London's financial district and internationally. We consciously adopted a tempered radical approach (Meyerson and Scully, 1995) practising engaged scholarship without overt activism (King and Learmonth, 2015). On reflection, our informal conversations with practitioners were often imbued with more 'behind the scenes' activism than our earlier publications conveyed. In the 2006 FFR, we dispelled Chairs' widely shared beliefs about the lack of qualified women candidates by examining women's human capital, revealing that the key obstacles were social capital and headhunters' 'gate-keeping'. Our repeated focus on headhunters led to them becoming a crucial stakeholder in the influential Davies Review (see below). As our reputation with practitioners and government strengthened, we provided a platform for action by articulating more strongly the causes for the lack of WoB, in addition to documenting annual trends. We engaged key actors of various organizations in the inquiry (Radaelli *et al.*, 2014). In 2009, we sought to counter the myth propagated by headhunters and Chairs that the cause of women's low representation on corporate boards was a lack of supply. As Pfeffer and Sutton (2006) state, one of the main challenges for evidence-based practice is not just what practitioners and policymakers do not know, but 'what they think they know that isn't so' – i.e., unlearning of false knowledge

(Rousseau, 2012). Therefore, we analysed the senior management of 1,400 listed boards, assembling a list of potential women directors (“The 100 Women to Watch” – W2W) to highlight that the issue was one of demand rather than supply.

The 2005-2010 time period was defined by a deepening of relationships with senior business leaders (Das, 2003) and government, issue consolidation in public debate, establishment of an international reputation, and development of more nuanced explanations and solutions to address the issue. Through our sustained engagement, we mediated the dialogue between senior business leaders and policymakers, who sought our rigour and expertise (Marcos and Denyer, 2012) and recognized us as the official source of WoB research in the UK. We initially sought to portray impartiality in our reports, which in hindsight could be interpreted as an acceptance of hegemonic discourses about the need to justify ‘the business case’ for WoB. Over time we focused on ‘myth-busting’ by addressing incorrect assumptions about the lack of qualified women. We adopted a more critical perspective, exposing entrenched masculine organizational cultures and reporting why the share of women directors would not change dramatically through organic processes (Kogut *et al.*, 2014). Our roles shifted from impartial providers of data, towards recommending actions for change, moving from awareness to action (Stead and Elliott, 2012). The tipping point occurred in 2009-10 with the changing institutional context (i.e. global financial crash and the need for corporate governance reform; EU commission vociferous about boardroom quotas, and political upheaval in the UK) and with a decade of research evidence behind us, we adopted a more instrumental stance.

#### *Leveraging relationships through engaged activism (post 2010)*

After 2010, the WoB issue rose to the top of policy agendas in the UK and globally (Ferreira, 2015; Seierstad *et al.*, 2015) with a substantial increase in academic and practitioner publications. With the EU threat of board quotas looming, the UK government

appointed Lord Davies to conduct an independent review into WoB. The Davies Report was launched in 2011 and included ten recommendations for multiple stakeholders (see Appendix 2). Davies set a 25% target for women FTSE 100 board directors by 2015, adding the FTSE 250 a year later. Unlike previous reports, Davies' recommendations did not focus on women making changes, but recognized the systemic nature of the problem and highlighted 'regimes of responsibility' amongst the "fullest possible range of stakeholders on projects directed towards the co-production of knowledge and action" (Hodgkinson and Starkey, 2012, p. 606). The Davies Review, of which our centre's work was an integral part, is credited as the world's most successful voluntary WoB initiative, achieving a doubling of women board directors in only five years (see Appendix 3).

Lord Davies was supported by a Steering Committee of five executive-level business leaders and one academic from our team. The 2011 Davies Report is based predominantly on our research. For example, our FFR research on the board appointment process (see Appendix 1) led to the Davies Report recommendation that headhunters collectively compose a Voluntary Code of Conduct (VCC) that would enhance diversity in their recruitment. After leading headhunters produced a VCC, the Equality & Human Rights Commission (EHRC) commissioned our research team to conduct a study appraising headhunters' conformance to their new VCC. This study shaped an enhanced version of the VCC in 2013, illustrating a research-practice-research dynamic. The centre's FFR reports became aligned with the change agenda advocated by the Davies Review. With this agenda discussed in the media, we embraced our role as 'reformative activists' (Den Hond and De Bakker, 2007). Our publications became more normative in tone, encouraging business to challenge the workplace 'masculinities in action' (Bevan and Learmonth, 2013, p. 154), and offering examples of talent management practices that disrupt entrenched gender bias in the workplace (Vinnicombe, *et al.*, 2014).

The Davies Report prompted a larger range of stakeholders to engage with increasing boardroom gender balance, expanding “the problem space, scope and potential of new design solutions” (Hodgkinson and Starkey, 2012, p. 607). This occasionally meant managing conflicting priorities and political agendas (Smith *et al.*, 2012). For instance, prior to the Davies Report, GEO had ‘owned’ the agenda. Subsequently, due to a conscious repositioning as a business issue, BIS took leadership. As researchers, we sometimes had to negotiate tensions between these co-sponsoring government departments. Occasionally, “the space for dialogue was squeezed” (Marcos and Denyer, 2012, p.456). As academics, our agenda was to understand and explain progress regarding WoB. However, stakeholders with divergent motivations “may preclude the integration of academic evidence and practitioner knowing” (ibid, p.456). For example, when our predictions suggested we may not hit Davies’ 25% target, one government department was opposed to this being publicized as it could jeopardize the UK government’s argument against EU quotas on boards. The partnership with the government was a ‘mixed blessing’. Whilst undoubtedly strengthening the influence of our research, it also meant that our reports became tangled up in political agendas, with leading politicians leveraging them to suit their agendas and broader ideologies.

The Davies Committee convened every six months to assess progress and asked the authors to produce regular monitoring reports. This continuous provision of evidence helped to destabilize the status quo (den Hond and de Bakker, 2007). Centre researchers were asked to contribute to the Financial Reporting Council’s Code changes and commissioned to report on compliance in 2012, 2013, and 2014. Report findings triggered changes in UK Company Law and corporate governance codes (see Appendix 1), impacting corporate governance regulations. This again illustrates the research-practice-research dynamic, engaging the ‘community’ (Marquis, 2003) and shaping “standards of appropriateness” (Marquis *et al.*, 2007, p.926) through collaboration with prominent Chairs and corporate governance

regulators over several years. Pressures of isomorphism and social normative influence are strong in dense social networks, such as those of the FTSE Chairs, thus our reporting of ‘best practice’ played a role in encouraging others to align their reporting to achieve legitimacy (Marquis *et al.*, 2007).

Our final input into the Davies Review came in 2015 when the Steering Committee took stock of progress and concluded its activity. Our 2015 FFR presented a qualitative study with key stakeholders in the field (Chairs, CEOs, headhunters, directors, and subject-matter experts), proposing a change agenda going forward, using our research in engaged activism (Vinnicombe, *et al.*, 2015). Many FFR recommendations and quotes were highlighted in the Davies Closing Report of late 2015, thus shaping institutional change going forward and consolidating our alignment with a change agenda in the field (Sealy *et al.*, 2016).

Taken together, we believe that our research team’s long-term engagement with a range of practitioners created impact in the trading zones of WoB field, as evidenced by the inclusion of our work as a Research Excellence Framework impact case study. To instigate change, researchers can either work at a field level on the institutional structures or at an organizational level to change practices (Den Hond and De Bakker, 2007). Our research group simultaneously pursued field and institutional levels, liaising between different stakeholders in the field (corporates, government, headhunters, and NGOs). Certainly, it is difficult and time-consuming to create and sustain “mutually respectful relationships” (Bartunek, 2007, p.1329) among academics, business practitioners and government, as each group holds stereotypes about the others (Davidson and James, 2007). We also cultivated good relationships with journalists to ensure public visibility of our research, resulting in over 1,300 media mentions in a decade (see Appendix 4). Our role evolved over time, from greater awareness raising, establishing credibility as an impartial research source, building relationships with policymakers and senior business leaders, co-constructing knowledge



through a dialogic process, and finally becoming an integral part of the change campaign. Our long-term engagement depended on the political support of ministers from different parties and governments, so the team's ability to position the case for increasing WoB with broad political appeal was critical. This dominance of business case logics meant that we could not utilize more 'radical' arguments of social justice (Oswick and Noon, 2014). We therefore trod carefully when suggesting ideas for change to achieve a balance between delivering difficult messages about diversity and not alienating our corporate audience.

### **Interfacing between the trading zone and the academic field of WoB**

Having outlined the practical impact of our work, we now describe how we interfaced between our trading zones and the academic field of women on boards, enabling cross-fertilization of ideas between academics and practitioners (Greig *et al.*, 2012) through a practice-research-theory-research-practice dynamic.

#### *Development of the Women on Boards field and cross-fertilization of ideas*

Our body of work developed within a broader field of WoB scholarship, which shaped our interactions with practitioners in each trading zone, and our academic contributions to the field itself. Since 2005, the authors have published over 60 peer-reviewed journal articles, government- and business-sponsored reports, book chapters, and edited books directly related to WoB (see Appendix 6 for the full list). We, therefore, avoid the challenge of claiming impact from a single study (Briner *et al.*, 2009; Rousseau *et al.*, 2008). This body of work reflects our outreach beyond our institution and academia (Hodgkinson and Starkey, 2012) and reflects how we interfaced the practitioner and academic communities by being able to speak the language of both communities through practitioner reports and peer-reviewed publications.

The broader WoB literature is traditionally descriptive rather than theoretical. For example, a well-cited WoB literature review from our group (Terjesen, *et al.*, 2009) reports that only ten percent of over 400 WoB publications (pre-2009) address theory. Early WoB studies were primarily descriptive and cross-sectional, relying on publicly available datasets at an individual or group level of analysis, and often focusing on sex differences in aspiring or incumbent board members. The few theoretical papers utilized micro-perspective human capital or social identity lenses. Few authors adopted field level analyses (Terjesen and Singh's 2008 multi-country study of environmental context is a notable exception). Overall, WoB theorizing and practical recommendations were mostly micro-level prior to 2009. The 2009 review called for the development of theoretical perspectives and research beyond the USA and UK. While the post-2009 WoB literature is still dominated by descriptive papers correlating women's presence on boards to financial performance indicators (e.g. Chapple and Humphrey, 2014; Haslam *et al.*, 2010; Joecks *et al.*, 2013; Post and Byron, 2015; Sabatier, 2015; Tanaka, 2014), noteworthy developments include the extension of studies beyond Anglo-Saxon countries (Abdullah, 2014; Tipurić *et al.*, 2015; Ujunwa, 2012) and increased inter-disciplinary contributions from finance, law, and governance (Bao *et al.*, 2014; Branson, 2012; Choudhury, 2015; Gregory *et al.*, 2013; Magnier and Rosenblum, 2014). As the WoB field becomes more global, interdisciplinary, and focused on change mechanisms (e.g. quotas or voluntary measures), there has been a recent emergence of new theoretical lenses including comparative corporate governance (Iannotta, *et al.*, 2016), corporate governance deviance (Aguilera, *et al.*, 2016), social roles (Chizema, *et al.*, 2015), and institutional theory (Singh, *et al.*, 2015, Carrasco, *et al.*, 2015; Gabaldon *et al.*, 2015; Seierstad, 2015; Perrault, 2015).

We have contributed to and drawn from this collective thinking in the field by expanding our network of academic relationships across continents and disciplines. As early

researchers in this field, we collectively peer-reviewed over 120 WoB academic articles over the past decade, influencing the complex network of action that unfolds impact and research agendas. We have organized and contributed to numerous seminars and conferences, our academic work and practitioner reports feeding into others' academic work (e.g. Terjesen *et al.*, 2009, has over 450 citations), raising awareness and questioning hegemonic normative assumptions. While theory building is traditionally considered the measure of academic impact, the high citations of our reports in academic circles (Appendix 5) suggest that our issue-driven work has helped to legitimize WoB as a research topic. We were frequently invited to present the 'UK case' at academic and policymaking conferences internationally and asked to advise on (e.g. Lückerrath-Rovers, 2008) and conduct equivalent FFR studies in other countries (e.g. Hong Kong, 2009; India, 2010). We also brought insights from other countries into our conversations with practitioners in trading zones, highlighting lessons for the UK (e.g., the 2009 FFR included contributions from Norwegian and Spanish scholars (Sealy, *et al.*, 2009)). These international perspectives and new theoretical lenses focused on macro-level change rather than micro-level issues which strengthened our arguments for change in trading zone collaborations, especially after 2010.

#### *Converting issue-driven research into academic outputs*

Consistent with Davis and Marquis (2005), we characterize our early work as driven by issues that surfaced as relevant in dialogic trading zones with stakeholders in the field (Das, 2003), in contrast with traditional academic work that is paradigm-driven with theoretically-derived hypotheses (Burgoyne and Turnbull James, 2006). Prompted by questioning prominent practitioner "fix the women" discourses or assumptions regarding the reasons behind the lack of WoB, over time, our analytical focus gradually shifted from individual (micro) to field (macro) level (see Table 1). This micro to macro transition was driven by issues discussed in our trading zones and theorized for academia. We initially

explored multiple micro-level explanations (e.g. publishing papers on human capital). On deepening our theoretical understanding of such theories and bringing them to the trading zones, we realized that individual-level interventions could neither explain, nor substantially impact either meso-level organizational cultures or the complexity of the wide field issues. We broadened our scope of inquiry to deficiencies in the board appointment process which were raised in the field, leading to studies of headhunters as change agents. As national-level change became the dominant debate due to the threat of an EU-wide quota and the impactful Davies Review, our recent research focused on national and field-level factors explaining women's presence on boards in various countries, and on the benefits and controversies of voluntary and mandatory change strategies.

[Insert Table 1 here]

Converting issue-driven work into journal publications required experimentation with various theoretical lenses. We realized that we needed theoretical frameworks encompassing the workings of environments, organizations, teams, and individuals (Radaelli *et al.*, 2014), and the dynamics of multiple players in an institutional change field (Davis and Marquis, 2005; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the process of theoretical development of issue-driven research to an academic publication. The first paper (Figure 1) is based on a project commissioned by policymakers (EHRC, 2012) and examines how headhunters implemented the VCC following the Davies Review. Report findings were quite quickly impactful in terms of informing practitioners in that trading zone about changes to board selection processes. Development into a peer-reviewed journal paper required a longer timeframe and experimentation with diversity management and institutional theory literatures. Our contribution to both diversity and institutional theory literatures consists of locating the micro-processes that underpin the change agency of marginal and external diversity actors, whose opportunistic role we described as 'accidental activism'. We

contributed to a more dispersed understanding of change agency in institutional fields (Battilana, *et al.*, 2009; Garud, *et al.*, 2002; Lawrence, *et al.*, 2013), expanding the limited theoretical understanding of change actors and processes in the WoB field (Seierstad *et al.*, 2015).

[Insert Figure 1 here]

The second paper (Figure 2) was motivated by conversations about strategies to increase the share of WoB with practitioners in trading zones and with international academic colleagues. While UK practitioners were opposed to quotas, an increasing number of countries were implementing various legislative frameworks. Yet practitioner arguments on the subject appeared based more on emotional response rather than empirical evidence. Having identified tensions and dilemmas with quotas, the paper draws on and integrates four different theoretical perspectives (social identity, human capital, stakeholder, and institutional theories) to explain the tensions, the previous lack of progress on WoB, and the recent spurt of change, “linking the actions of individuals to collectives through social mechanisms” (Davis and Marquis, 2005: 338). For example, we demonstrated how isomorphism strongly influences corporate behaviour because of the need for legitimacy (Marquis *et al.*, 2007). The paper concludes that as quotas are a multi-level phenomena, academic researchers should take a more integrative approach.

[Insert Figure 2 here]

This section has outlined our academic-facing role and, influenced by multiple perspectives in the trading zones, our evolving analytical focus from the practice world of micro to macro level and single to multi-theoretical explanations. Communicating in what many academics (particularly from the ‘women in management’ field) experience as hostile environments exposed us to different languages and ideologies. This helped develop our

understanding of the issue from the practitioner and policymaking side, and of how to reframe our logics in their language to make our ideas more accessible and palatable. We illustrated the theoretical conversion process underpinning the publication of issue-driven work in leading academic journals, demonstrating that it is possible to bridge the divide in the logics of academic and non-academic readership (Pascal, *et al.*, 2013). However, this requires openness to experiment with different theoretical perspectives - an exercise that is time consuming and might seem unusual to scholars wedded to specific theoretical perspectives.

### **Expanding the notion of trading zones**

Reflecting on a long-term body of research, the above sections sought to illustrate processes and practices that enable impact by drawing on the concept of dialogic ‘trading zones’. We outlined how practitioner-academic collaborations were established and evolved, enabling co-creation of knowledge and reframing of problems from micro to macro focus. We also examined how we interfaced between trading zones and the academic field by speaking the language of both practitioner and academic, and cross-fertilising ideas through converting issue-driven work into academic publications. We now discuss how this reflection extends scholarship on processes enabling research impact, focusing on the three trading zone characteristics outlined by Romme *et al.* (2015): action-oriented, durable, and based on psychological safety.

#### *Action-oriented trading zones require diverse stakeholders and versatile researcher roles*

Successful trading zones are action-oriented with common goals shared by those involved, despite their disparate logics (Romme *et al.*, 2015). Extant literature on research-practice impact is generally conceptual (Maclean, *et al.*, 2002), with the few empirical studies typically focusing on a single client organization (e.g. Marcos and Denyer, 2012; Radaelli *et*

*al.*, 2014; Swan *et al.*, 2012). Thus, our understanding of how common goals are defined in such collaborations is based on a narrow definition of the practitioner as represented by a single organization or its senior managers (Thorpe and Rawlinson, 2014). Our experience suggests we need to broaden the perspective when identifying relevant non-academic stakeholders who co-define goals in trading zones. Counterintuitively, our impact in the WoB field was not primarily generated through engagement with the key targets of our work – FTSE 350 Chairs – who had most agency in implementing change. Instead, impact was achieved through partnership constellations with a host of relevant stakeholders: governmental policymakers, businesses, key corporate individuals, headhunters, media, and change champions such as Lord Davies. While the UK’s WoB approach is framed as ‘business-led’ (Davies, 2011), our sustained collaborations showed that government played a key role in galvanising change, albeit from the shadows. This complicates our understanding of who the ‘target’ of impact should be, suggesting that research impact can be indirect yet potent. We thus join other scholars who call for a broader understanding of the impact ‘audience’ (Fournier & Grey, 2000; Willmott, 2008). Our multi-stakeholder operationalising of trading zones suggests that sometimes scholars need to engage in ‘polylogic’ rather than dialogic encounters in trading zones.

In addition to the broader conceptualization of stakeholders co-constituting trading zones, we note that our role as researchers in these trading zones evolved over the 15 year period. Our long-term aim of building relationships in the field called for an early pragmatic, tempered radical approach (Meyerson and Scully, 1995) by building credibility with stakeholders while being invested in social change, perceived incongruous by some of these stakeholders. We negotiated the balance between disrupting and questioning, without making practitioners feel too uncomfortable (King and Learmonth, 2015). The long timeline presented reveals different research roles underpinning our engaged scholarship from

impartial data provision with tentative change suggestions to a more prescriptive research-informed stance, culminating in a public partnership with an institutional change champion who achieved substantial change in gender representation on FTSE boards. By engaging with multiple stakeholders and by being part of this change coalition we contributed to deinstitutionalization and re-institutionalization (Strang and Meyer, 1993) through ‘theorization’ (co-articulating the need for change and the benefits of alternative institutional arrangements). Our later activist engagement also exposed us to increasing political tensions within trading zones, which we discuss below.

#### *Durability of trading zones enables gestation of ideas*

Romme *et al.* (2015) argue that successful trading zones must be durable, thereby rendering collaboration more visible and tangible. Our case indicates that beyond the visibility of collaboration, the durability of trading zones allowed for impact through the accumulation of a critical mass of evidence and the gestation of ideas in the field. Our distinctive longevity in the field and the co-constitutive dialogic/polylogic process with multiple practitioners (Denis and Lomas, 2003) shaped the redefinition of problems and solutions in the field, impacting both scholarly work and practice. Our initial analyses were often at a micro/individual level, mirroring how the issue was pitched by non-academic stakeholders. Early articles and reports focused on women directors’ careers and their added value to boards in terms of skills (e.g. Singh, *et al.*, 2008). Interventions (e.g. FTSE cross-mentoring scheme) also sought to address this presumed individual-level deficit. Our analyses successfully dispelled myths related to the lack of available female talent. Additionally, our direct engagement with business provided evidence that micro-level interventions, whilst helping the individuals concerned, had limited field level impact. The collective understanding of problems and our research focus progressed towards the meso-level issues such as non-inclusive organizational cultures and board selection processes. Our



constant research focus foregrounded the issue of gender and challenged “often unspoken organizational norms” (Stead and Elliott, 2012: p.386). As conversations increasingly focused on action for change (post-2011 Davies Review), we concentrated on the field as the unit of analysis (Davis and Marquis, 2005), drawing on theoretical perspectives that enable broader analytical focus (e.g., institutional theory). Throughout our engagement, we endeavoured to educate stakeholders that they are part of a ‘regime of responsibility’ accountable for ethical failures in organizations (Goodstein and Wicks, 2007) such as the homogeneity of corporate boards. As researchers, we enabled gestation of ideas in the field through a process of ‘agonistic pluralism’ that engaged multiple stakeholders over time, creating and providing spaces for discord and altered power dynamics, rather than trying to deny or eliminate them (Dawkins, 2014; 2015). This allowed mutually beneficial solutions to such problems and “practices emerge over time” (MacIntosh *et al.*, 2012, p. 375).

Gestation and cross-fertilization of ideas occurred by interfacing with both practitioner stakeholders in our trading zones and academic communities in the WoB field more broadly. Seeking to speak the language of both communities, we published regular reports to bridge communication gaps with practitioners and drew on various theoretical perspectives to frame our issue-driven research for top journal publication – a process of theoretical development that is unorthodox compared to more traditional paradigm-driven scholarly work. Our practitioner/policy reports received extensive publicity and have prompted research in countries latterly trying to address this issue, giving us the opportunity to synthesize their research perspectives into our work (Denyer, *et al.*, 2008). Complex issues such as the multi-level WoB require multidisciplinary approaches (Terjesen and Politis, 2015) and recently we have seen increased interest in the topic of WoB extended to law, governance, and ethics scholars. Our practitioner reports have fed into other researchers’ work in these fields (e.g. Branson, 2012; Choudhury, 2015; Seierstad, 2015) and we were

able to engage with evidence from around the world enabling “exploration and exchanges of ideas across disciplines” (Terjesen and Politis, 2015, p. 155). Contributing to, engaging with, and utilising the critical mass of academic and non-academic literature facilitated a shift in attention to the systemic, theorising macro conditions enabling change. Theorization is the “justification of an abstract solution” (Greenwood, *et al.*, 2002; p.60) and a precondition to deinstitutionalization, as it explains why a particular practice is needed (Strang and Meyer, 1993). Additionally, four authors are now affiliated with different institutions, and although we continue to collaborate, new roles and environments created novel thought spaces for theory development. Pluralism of perspectives necessitates time to settle and “changes within a theoretical narrative...” such as those that have materialized in the WoB field “... occur through the accumulation of myriad smaller contributions and adjustments made by individuals and groups over time” (MacIntosh *et al.*, 2012, p. 378).

*Psychological safety in trading zones is bounded by trade-offs, power and politics*

Romme *et al.* (2015) state that successful trading zones should be free from domination or coercion - that is, places of psychological safety that allow authentic dialogue. We question whether this is genuinely achievable when the nature of multiple stakeholders is likely to require astute navigation of political dynamics and a series of compromises. We suggest stakeholders, including academics, need to be ‘comfortable with discomfort’. Organizational politics is conceptualized as a way of negotiating competing interests and power bases, hidden agendas, and informal influence (Buchanan, 2008; Mintzberg, 1985). This political perspective is not largely incorporated into current debates about research impact, thus creating an illusion of rationality (Hodgkinson, 2012). Navigating competing agendas has been a persistent challenge in our sustained engagement with various stakeholders. With the corporate and government sponsorship we received, we negotiated various expectations in terms of what was reported and how findings were framed. Equality

regulators deemed we should be bolder in our recommendations, whilst corporate sponsors were sensitive about perceived criticism. Report launch events often involved extended and draining informal negotiations as every actor sought visibility to promote certain messages. During collaborations, we were also aware of the varying levels of dedication to equality and diversity issues, and the gaps in publicly stated versus private commitment to the goals of the trading zone. In recent years, government departments sometimes suggested a celebratory tone to our findings when we thought the data did not warrant it. Such pressures ranged from tactful suggestions made on draft reports to furious phone calls from senior civil servants when we disagreed. Despite the longevity of our relationships in the field, such political tensions have not disappeared and we believe that it would be unrealistic to expect them to diminish. Instead, we argue that scholars engaged in trading zones should recognize political issues and use political skill (Ferris, *et al.*, 2007) to manage them, drawing on social astuteness (recognising evolving stakeholder agendas), interpersonal influence, and networking ability (leveraging relationships to reconcile competing expectations). One's willingness to engage in politics depends on a subjective appraisal of the outcomes and ethical dilemmas of political behaviour (Doldor, *et al.*, 2013), thereby considering personal values, professional standards, potential consequences on long-term relationships, and, consequently, the research impact. These decisions were not always straightforward or comfortable. While Romme *et al.* (2015) admit that any dialogue is political, we believe that these authors downplay the effect of politics in the interpersonal dynamics between stakeholders and overestimate the degree of psychological safety required in these interactions. Certainly, there are many opportunities for future research on the dynamics of power and politics in trading zones, and the decision-making regarding which zones are set-up, supported or closed down, as undoubtedly without support they are fragile (Marcos and

Denyer, 2012), raising ethical issues regarding what knowledge is deemed useful and “whose interests are served in practice” (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2010, p.1191).

Drawing on more critical perspectives on the debates around impact (Butler *et al.*, 2015; Learmonth *et al.*, 2012), we agree that relevance cannot be meaningfully discussed without considering the personal costs and trade-offs scholars face when engaging with external practitioners and organizations. Thus we reflect on and acknowledge the web of power relations in the social, political, and institutional context (Cunliffe, 2003) that shapes our scholarly practice. Immersed in the issue field of WoB, we had to develop legitimacy with key stakeholders through sustained engagement in trading zones, as explained above. In doing so, and by challenging the outsider-insider academic-practitioner divide (Marcos and Denyer, 2012) as diversity scholars with emancipatory aims, we incurred the risk of co-optation into dominant discourses, potentially ‘taming’ and depoliticising the cause (Swan and Fox, 2010) by using widely accepted business case arguments for board diversity (Oswick and Noon, 2014). The effect was our tempered activism on academic scholarship and practical impact, and ability to challenge dominant discourses about diversity and equality (Özbilgin and Tatli, 2011) was bounded. Stakeholder engagement relied on pragmatic acceptance of arguments that had currency in business and policy circles. Over time, we refined and expanded these arguments rather than challenging them upfront. We also sought to nuance the ‘business case’ by stressing less tangible indicators such as improved decision-making processes on boards and more inclusive organizational cultures (Terjesen *et al.*, 2009). Additionally, while we did not use explicit social justice arguments in our reports, we did draw attention to issues such as micro-injustices and gender bias in board-related processes. Thus we raised issues of procedural justice in corporate governance (Doldor, 2012) and reframed the conversation on gender to a focus on organizational processes and cultures. However, the partial and pragmatic acceptance of hegemonic

discourses about the business case isolated us from other, more critical, academic colleagues in the field of gender in management.

We were unable to challenge the unbridled confidence that voluntary (rather than legislative) measures are best suited to address women's under-representation on boards, and the simplistic discourses opposing quotas in business circles. Business leaders emphasized that such change needs to be business-led, while government ministers were keen to stress that "government is there to support business, not to over-regulate it". This discourse did not reflect our experience in trading zones watching governments orchestrate key initiatives from the shadows. Leveraging such frames of reference might have been a politically savvy way to increase pressure for change and engage stakeholders, but this left unchallenged the entrenched neo-liberal discourses about free market deregulation that primarily serve the interests of business and are detrimental to long-term equality and social justice (Noon, 2007; Özbilgin and Tatli, 2011). We were thus faced with 'discomforting practices' (King and Learmonth, 2015) in trying to utilize arguments that were persuasive for instigating change, while simultaneously reinforcing broader narratives that conflicted with our political/philosophical views. Our arguments are bolder and more nuanced in academic outputs than in policy reports. Scholars seeking impact need to speak the language of both academic and practitioner audiences and tailor arguments accordingly (Dutton *et al.*, 2001), perhaps an undesirable compromise to more 'purist', intransigent scholars.

Another trade-off stemming from the pursuit of impact concerns individual careers. We published and launched 20 public reports (see Appendix 6) in the past decade. These reports allowed us to overcome gaps in communication practices between academics and practitioners, and avoid producing only esoteric knowledge consumed by a narrow circle of academic peers (Pfeffer, 2007; Starkey and Madan, 2001). While our initial institution undoubtedly benefitted from the publicity and reputation, it did not always legitimize our

work internally, excluding it from general management or leadership courses, suggesting an enduring perception of the research field as ‘niche’. Our investment in practitioner engagement and publications was sometimes at the expense of producing top-tier journal publications which constitute the principal currency for academic careers. In addition, some of our authors suffered from hostile public reaction to the group’s work. For example, multiple abusive comments about our findings can be found online and the House of Lords imposed a closed hearing out of concerns for two authors’ safety following repeated threats by a member of the public.

### **Concluding remarks**

This paper sought to contribute to debates on research impact by expanding and problematizing the concept of trading zones as spaces of dialogic encounter between academics and practitioners (Romme *et al.*, 2015). Our time-sensitive analysis of engaged WoB scholarship demonstrated the importance of broadening our definition of relevant ‘practitioners’ beyond managers and showed that longevity of trading zones calls for different researcher roles to generate impact, enabling the reframing of problems and shared goals through co-construction of knowledge and idea gestation. We also argued that dialogic encounters require acceptance of trade-offs and political manoeuvrings, issues relatively neglected in literature on research impact (Butler *et al.*, 2015).

One limitation of our analysis is that in the interest of telling a complex story, we have presented the authors of this paper as a homogeneous group, glossing over our diversity (age, background, career stage, nationality, ethnicity, and other research interests). The six authors span four decades in age and three generations of doctoral students, but share a passion to have a positive impact beyond academia, affecting the careers of the women we research. The practice of supervising one another for doctoral research meant that initially we formed a community with shared understandings of methodology and a common expertise of

qualitative research, allowing us to move beyond the ‘counting heads’ approach of other women on boards studies. However, with the senior researcher in her sixties and close to retirement and her initial post-doctoral student retiring mid-way through this period, obtaining high quality academic publications was not a priority for the senior researcher. This presented a challenge for the more junior researchers, whose priority was learning their craft. Thus, we suggest that research teams seeking impact need a strategic balancing of roles to ensure they develop both research capacity and other abilities needed to function in the trading zone. In addition, the longitudinal nature of the research and the demands of the practitioner partners’ demands for ‘regular drumbeat reports’ made prioritizing academic writing a particular challenge. Thus, four of the six authors subsequently moved to different universities. With a change of institution, early-career authors were exposed to differing theoretical debates, broadening their perspectives: for example, debates on diversity versus equality, and the ‘business case’ and voluntarism versus social justice arguments. These more diverse perspectives have helped authors feed into broader elements of the academic field and enhanced their publications. In addition, the international backgrounds (nationality and experience) of most of the authors, with one subsequently working across three continents, allowed us to broaden the debate beyond the UK context and maintain international perspectives. This undoubtedly helped with longitudinal engagement with both policymakers and organisations, and also in the academic field.

All but the senior researcher entered academia after careers of various lengths in industry and/or consulting which, as we have mentioned above, may well have helped with the long-term relationships developed in the trading zones. This also meant that they have brought in other research interests (for example, ethnicity). This has been fed into the political and research agenda when there was an institutional opening for change in this area,

and the conversation has now expanded to include ethnicity on boards, thus enriching the scholarly focus and scope for impact.

However, researching corporate elites is challenging and some authors felt that aspects of their diversity (nationality, ethnicity, age, accent and non-corporate background) required mindful effort to manage their ‘outsider’ status and be seen as credible to practitioners within the trading zones. This status meant being less embedded in the establishment, but perhaps allowed a more critical outlook on the implicit norms of these elites, being more alert to some of the silenced issue in the debate – for example, some practitioners’ emphasis on placing British women on boards, as a priority over women of other nationalities, felt to non-British authors uncomfortable and insensitive to intersectionality. Such critical distance shaped the tactful challenges we put forward to practitioners, but was also instrumental to developing academic publications. In terms of our own diversity, we conclude that it has both enriched and challenged the research process and has allowed us to form genuine friendships and mutual respect over the years.

Another limitation is that our case is also not generalizable to all management scholars seeking impact, as trading zones are, by their nature, highly context-dependent. Our insights about the characteristics and processes enabling impact in trading zones warrant further development. Future research could examine and theorize researchers’ change agency and dialogic skills in academic-practitioner collaborations by drawing on literatures on organizational and institutional change, and organizational politics.

Universities and higher education leaders need to consider how to support the processes required for the development of trading zones, both in terms of institutional resources (e.g. workload models reflecting the time costs incurred by practitioner collaborations and logistical support for events), and research capacity building (e.g. What skills do scholars need to enhance their dialogic ability? How could these be developed?).



One challenge identified by Romme *et al.* (2015) is that many traditionally trained academics lack the experience and capabilities of problem-driven collaboration with practitioners. It is perhaps of interest that most of our team were mature former practitioners, which facilitated interactions with business leaders and policymakers. Finally, while the UK's Research Excellence Framework creates mounting institutional pressures to demonstrate impact (Learmonth *et al.*, 2012; Pettigrew, 2011), we suggest that business schools should avoid promoting a heroic perspective of impact in which scholars are pressured to claim unrealistic influence outside academia. Such impact is often context-dependent. Our experience was borne of our response to the particular environmental context and time period in the UK, where a confluence of events generated growing readiness for change. As we finalize this paper in the wake of Brexit, we are reminded of the precarious macro-level conditions that create or prohibit fruitful trading zones.

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