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

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ABSTRACT

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

1. Introduction

The background of the research addressed in this article is the global financial crisis that started in 2008 and the tensions and challenges this crisis inflicted upon the international business of small and medium sized export-dependent companies to adapt to this new situation. A research project was initiated to develop robust and practically actionable knowledge about the internationalization strategies of Swedish small and medium sized companies in emerging markets by focusing on organizational learning in turbulent times. In planning the project, it was soon realized that it is hard to develop new knowledge in small firms, since there are very few parties within the firm to share it with. So, to develop such organizational knowledge, the firm needs to collaborate with other firms to share experiences. It was also discovered that to succeed in such an endeavor, the collaboration needs to be pragmatic or useful by favoring the individual interests of the firms. Due to the complexity of such research, it can hardly be handled by one researcher alone. Thus, to study collaboration among SMEs based on their own interests, researchers need to collaborate among themselves. There are a few studies on joint project teams collaborating in doing IB research (Salmi, 2011), but none that examines how researchers collaborate with firms on equal terms to develop joint knowledge. So, no relevant existing methodology could be found for such a study. The rather ordinary qualitative methodology reviewed by Salmi (2011) does not help much, since it is based on viewing firms as research objects. This also goes for international business (IB) research in general, which is quantitative, and ignores the possibility of knowledge generation through collaboration with firms.

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

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

To address the issues raised in this paper, we break away from the neo-positivist assumptions governing most traditional international business research where reality, also social reality, is seen as independent and external from the researcher, and where this reality can be accurately studied and truthfully described through theory with the goal of producing generalizable results (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Our research is in line with the growing interest in scientific research performed in interaction and collaboration with public organizations and private business partners, sometimes said to be part of a greater change in the social production of knowledge (Pettigrew, 2004). Politicians, fueled by a discourse putting scientific development and innovation to the forefront of societal progress and prosperity, often advocate research that is both scientifically valid and practically useful, preferably at the same time. This discourse is also disseminated to various public and private financers of research. Additionally, within management and business research this development has made its mark. Even though various forms of collaborative research with partners outside the research community have a long history within the business and management disciplines, there is a growing interest in research which does not approach organizations, companies or businesspeople as mere study objects, but instead as active joint partners in the creation of knowledge. The underlying rationale of such approaches is often expressed as a double objective of producing knowledge that is both scientifically valid and practically relevant (MacLean, MacIntosh, & Grant, 2002; Pettigrew, 2004). Many scholars acknowledge today that academic research within management is seldom used by practitioners and not even perceived as relevant to their interests (Alvesson, 2013; Bennis & O'Toole, 2005; Kmetz, 2011; Pasmore, Stymne, Shani, Morhman, & Adler, 2008; Starkey & Madan, 2001; Van den Ven & Johnson, 2006). To overcome this lack of perceived relevance and at the same time keep high scientific standards now seems to be one of the major challenges within business and management research (Starkey & Tiratsoo, 2007).

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

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

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

2. Collaborative research approaches within business studies

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

McTaggart, 2005). This development, however, has not yet made its mark within IB research. *Action research* remains as one of the most influential approaches, sometimes used as a generic term for collaborative research. Action research builds upon partnership between researchers and organizational members in order to solve an organizational problem and simultaneously develop scientific knowledge (Shani et al., 2004). Reason and Bradbury (2001: 1) describe action research as

> *a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing knowledge in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes... It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people.*

Other collaborative research approaches are *action science* concerned with the cognitive processes of individuals to promote learning, and the use of knowledge in systems; *developmental action inquiry*, which seeks to foster an inquiring approach in order to transform both individuals and organizations; *participative action research*, which seeks to transform a community through an egalitarian participation of both their members and participating researchers; *clinical field research*, which seeks learning opportunities in existing settings created by help-seeking clients, and, which will be the focus of this paper, *appreciative inquiry*, which seeks to aid systems development through the creation of positive images, and ideas, rather than problem solving (Shani et al., 2004). Differences between the approaches have been attributed mainly to the scope of the research, where much collaborative research, such as action research and participatory research, have historically addressed a wide scope of social issues seeking social transformation, often through the empowerment of the participants (French, 2009). Collaborative management research specifically focuses on the function of organizations and the management of such organizations toward certain outcomes (Pasmore et al., 2008).

All being collaborative research approaches, the different streams mentioned share certain characteristics and ambitions, however with different emphases. Collaborative research builds upon a true partnership between researchers and involved partners, based upon equality, working together toward the common goal of creating something together (Shani et al., 2004). The partnership often includes framing the research, choosing, developing and pursuing methods of inquiry, as well as developing implications and conclusions (Pasmore et al., 2008). Different degrees of collaborations are possible, even though the value of equality between the parties is sometimes stressed (Shani et al., 2004). The participating partners are no longer only objects of research or providers of information, but cooperating partners in a joint process of discovery and creation. The purpose and goal of the process are defined and developed together in order to sustain mutual relevance, and to create knowledge that is both scientific and actionable through the integration of 'scientific knowledge, methods, and values with practical knowledge, ways of working, and values' (Pasmore et al., 2008: 13). The process is both emergent and systematic (Shani et al., 2004), reflecting that the collaboration sets the scene for inquiry and interaction but is open for the necessary emergence of issues, methods, solutions and results. These and other characteristics bring special challenges to the practice of collaborative research, which will be discussed in this paper.

2.1. Epistemological challenges

The challenge of producing knowledge that is both scientifically valid and practically relevant can be depicted as a dilemma between positive and normative research. The definition of these constructs by Hunt (1991: 12) for marketing research is generally valid: 'positive marketing (research) adopts the perspective of attempting to describe, explain, predict, and understand the marketing phenomena that actually exist,' and 'normative marketing adopts the perspective of attempting to prescribe what marketing organizations and individuals ought to do.' This distinction, however, as well as the corresponding descriptions, ignores many of the underlying epistemological issues also involved within different streams of positive research, including aspects of truth and generalizability. It also underestimates the differences in normative research between doing research *for* organizations compared with *together with* organizations and their representatives. We therefore develop a methodology that goes deeper into this dilemma, in particular to align these opposites by looking upon them as two sides of the same coin.

As discussed above, we need to break away from the neo-positivist assumptions governing most traditional international business research. Instead we acknowledge that 'data' is always theory laden, meaning infused with and dependent upon existing frameworks, presumptions and vocabularies (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011), and consequently that empirical material is always constructed (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Shotter, 1993). We also recognize that all observations of any reality are embedded in language and, subsequently, the incapacity of language to mirror any reality 'out there' (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000). Instead of a medium between us and reality, language is seen as actively influencing every aspect of scientific inquiry and, generally, our understanding of the world. Thus, we see reality as an ongoing accomplishment and that our knowledge of that reality never passively corresponds to that reality but instead constructs it. Finally, which seems natural in collaborative research, we acknowledge that both we as researchers, as well as the collaborating research partners, are all active participants in that construction.

More specifically, the collaborative type of action research presented in this paper is therefore based upon a social constructionist epistemology, which stresses the social nature of knowledge (Berger & Luckman, 1966; Gergen, 1999; Reed, 2007). This means that knowledge is seen as a product of social interaction and communication, and that our understanding of reality is dependent upon our perception and interaction with others. Meanings become vital, since empirical patterns observed depend upon how the mind perceives a given situation. Interpretations may therefore vary from time to time and from context to context. This implies that the concept of truth in science is problematic. Alvesson and Sköldberg (2008) make a distinction between three aspects of truth: Meaning, correspondence and usefulness. Since they are all part of a research process, none should be excluded. Meaning concerns the construction itself; correspondence deals with how well theory describes and predicts reality, as well as generalization – how valid it is for different contexts, situations and occasions over time; and, usefulness concerns the extent to which the construction is pragmatically valuable. Traditionally, the former two aspects relate to different streams of what we have called positive research, while the latter aspect concerns normative management research (Hunt, 1991). The major methodological issue guiding this paper can now be specified as finding a synthesis between these three aspects of truth. Due to the epistemological perspective underlying this paper, we focus primarily on aligning meaning with usefulness. This does not mean, however, that the correspondence aspect is totally ignored. Even though we, because of the scientific assumptions sketched above, remain skeptical to the function of theory corresponding with external reality, we agree with Alvesson and Kärreman (2011) that this does not exclude the possibility that this reality can be addressed in more or less constructive ways.

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3. Collaborative research through appreciative inquiry

The collaborative research approach focused on in this paper is appreciative inquiry (see, for instance, Anderson et al., 2008; Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005; Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2008). Appreciative inquiry (AI) was created to develop organizations by focusing on the strengths of the organizations and the ambitions and visions of their members – not on the organizational problems typically the focus of action research (Ludema, Wilmot, & Srivastava, 1997). The underlying idea is that organizations develop in the direction that is the focus of the questions, conversations and thoughts of their members, since 'organizations are considered as the outcomes of their members' interactions with historical, cultural, social, economic and political occurrences' (Grant & Humphries, 2006: 403). Problems have a tendency to grow bigger the more they are focused upon, which consumes energy needed for other activities. To identify and talk about what works well instead gives energy and may be self-realizing. Even if AI was originally developed as a method for organizational change and renewal, there are also interesting arguments for its potential as a research method (Reed, 2007), especially through collaborative research in the field of management (Shani et al., 2004). This method builds upon genuine co-operation, which makes it suitable for joint production of knowledge, and focusing directly on both dilemmas addressed in this paper.

Our point of departure has been that having company representatives as part of the project has added important insights, experience and opinions related to the project's area of interest, which we could all learn from, scientists as well as practitioners. The ambition has been to let different experiences and perspectives meet, in order to further our joint understanding. AI is therefore relevant for collaborative research projects because it denies the need for distance between researcher and research object and

> *involves a number of research processes, namely, the development of the research questions and design in a collaborative way across the research setting, iterative processes of data collection and analysis, and the feeding back of the results of the analysis into the setting to stimulate change* (Reed, 2007: 64).

An important point of departure is that what is described as a problem depends upon perspective; different members of the same organization may have different perceptions of what works well or not. The purpose of appreciative inquiry is to involve a large share of the organizational members in dialogs and to mobilize energy toward common goals and the creation of a shared understanding of the activities. This is done through:

> ... *asking unconditionally positive questions that strengthen a system's capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten positive potential* (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005: 8).

Within the AI tradition, this is normally done through a learning and development cycle consisting of four issues, the so-called four Ds of AI (Cooperrider et al., 2008). The first is *discovery*, which means engaging people in an appreciative dialog around positive examples, successes and what works and is vital for the organization. Through this dialog, positive experiences are shared, consensus might begin to emerge and energy is both gained from and focused upon the positive, rather than problems. Second is *dream*, which means envisioning what might be, in the form of positive images of the future. Through this exercise, mind and energy are focused upon desired futures instead of potential threats and problems. Third is *design*. During the design phase, the participants engage in co-constructing the future by coming up with methods and architectures to reach the desired future based upon what has worked in the past and the envisioned desired future. The fourth phase is *destiny*, which means making the organization reach its destiny through the designed measures and the collective action and energy mobilized by the AI process. In later sections we will describe how the four phases of the AI cycle were incorporated into a collaborative research project within international business.

The AI approach is especially interesting during challenging economic times. To focus upon how the new situation may present a possibility, rather than a threat and a problem to avoid, may liberate interesting ideas. This is also in line with modern entrepreneurial thinking, which is more concerned with opportunity seeking than problem solving. Creation of markets instead of adapting to existing ones is then underlined.

4. The 'Learning in Networks' project

The methodology for studying research collaboration was developed within the project 'Learning in Networks – Developing the learning capability of the internationalizing firm.' It was launched in 2009 as a collaborative research project by a team of researchers from the Linnaeus University in Sweden and representatives from ten small and medium-sized exporters, predominantly industrial firms, situated in southeast Sweden. The focus was on inter-organizational learning of experiential knowledge within the internationalization process. All participating companies were working on emerging markets and shared an interest in developing their international activities. This network was thus created for learning purposes but the methodology can also be used within 'naturally occurring' networks, both horizontal and vertical, as long as the participants are open to share their experiences and appreciate each other's accomplishments.

Based on a social constructionist perspective, collaboration was studied with the AI methodology within a broader research process that is seen to express the main interest of the researchers involved in the project. Based on Alvesson and Sköldberg (2008), it is classified as abductive, or as the in vivo approach (Andersen & Kragh, 2011). Here, the evolution of the theoretical framework and the empirical work are parallel and inter-related (Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Hilmersson & Jansson, 2012b; Jansson & Söderman, 2012; Salmi, 2011). It rests on limited possibilities of generalization of various theories in time and space, focusing on theoretical development rather than pure theory generation. The empirical support of a theory is continuously assessed, or, inversely, a reality's theoretical support investigated, through the matching of theories with realities. The aim is to create congruence between experiential, practical and propositional ways of knowing (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Because of the differences in experience, but similarities in interests and challenges in international business among the participating companies, various perspectives both enrich the issues being focused upon and the lessons that can be learned about them. This further strengthens the connection to action research. This is based on the assumption that behaviors can only be changed by changing values and beliefs, and that they cannot be changed without testing them in action, i.e., learning from experience. As it relates to this project, it means that the researchers therefore need to understand how people within SMEs understand, solve and act on problems related to their internationalization process. Action and understanding are intertwined in a cycle of learning for both researcher and manager, in which there is a constant movement between reflection and action.

Thus, the major theoretical problem of the project concerns experiential knowledge as a key construct of internationalization process (IP) theory (Figueira-de-Lemos, Johanson, & Vahlne, 2011; Johanson & Vahlne, 1977). IP theory is poorly developed, especially for studying how internationalizing SMEs learn about on new emerging markets in relation to their existing general internationalization knowledge. As seen above, our methodology is well suited for developing theory, since it allows exploratory data generation within given theoretical frames. In this project, the participating firms influenced the research agenda by suggesting themes to be explored and arenas for exploration. These themes were jointly driven by the practical orientation of the firms and the construct-driven orientation of the researchers. Unforeseen data emerged from the process rather than being collected according to a predefined scheme. Inter alia, a practically relevant international learning-strategy typology was developed consisting of four types: Passive Learners, Endogenous Learners, Exogeneous Learners, and Diversified Learners (Åkerman, 2015). Another major theoretical result was the questioning of this key concept of IP theory itself. Experiential knowledge was found to be poorly defined, especially when studying internationalization processes between very disparate market environments. This aspect was developed in Hilmersson and Jansson (2012a). The reliance on individual decision theory in IP theory to be valid for experience is inconsistent, since it assumes that action automatically follows from decisions. Experience stems from action or practice, since experience arises from learning by doing. It is therefore only indirectly related to decision-making. Learning from experience means that current behavior is retrospective in reflecting the lessons from the past, rather than being entirely anticipatory and oriented to expectations about the future (March & Shapira, 1982). The source of uncertainty is then different, consisting of lack of relevant experience for future acts rather than lack of information for decision-making about future actions. Uncertainty is then assumed to primarily relate to lack of relevant experience. It arises in an incremental inter-organizational internationalization process, when firms cannot transform historical experiences into intentions to act in the future, either due to previous experiences being incorrectly understood, or due to unstable environments.

4.1. Mutual experience exchange as application of appreciative inquiry

More specifically, the project utilized the MEE (mutual experience exchange) Learning Method, labeled and developed by the research team. The foundation of this methodology is 24-h intensive workshops, where the participants can exchange experiences and work together with practically relevant and contemporary problems or challenges that one or several of the participants is facing. The starting point is preferably one of the participating companies, which, if possible, hosts the meeting or at least has a chance to present the company and illustrate the challenge in focus. In this way, the relevance of the issues for the participating companies is secured. This, together with a well-considered selection of participating companies and representatives with time and dedication to take active part in the project, are necessary prerequisites to create both relevance and rich and diverse contributions to the discussions. The method, as it was applied here, is also rather demanding regarding resources such as meeting facilities and participating researchers to moderate and support the activities as well as to document the discussions.

The project brought together 10 professionals (mostly sales managers or international sales representatives) representing 8 SMEs from southeast Sweden, all working on international business-to-business markets. The university team consisted of five researchers, stretching from professor to Ph.D. student. The project was initiated with a round of interviews with all company representatives in order to monitor expectations, gather overall information about the participating companies and their situations, and to collect interesting ideas and themes to focus upon during the project. Following this initiation phase, six MEE learning seminars were held. Except for the first seminar, all seminars included a visit to one of the participating companies. The seminars followed the appreciative inquiry cycle presented earlier in the following way:

• 1st seminar	Discovery	Company strengths and possibilities during the prevailing economic crisis
• 2nd seminar	Discovery/dream	Customer value and joint creation of value with customers in foreign markets, positive experiences and wishes for the future
• 3rd seminar	Dream/design	How can information and learning systems be organized to ensure customer orientation? What would an optimal system look like?
• 4th seminar	Design/destiny	Efficient implementation, how to increase learning and improve financial results
• 5th seminar	Destiny	Creativity and novel thinking in business activities
• 6th seminar	Destiny	Lessons learned since the beginning of the project and what to do next?

The seminars consisted of joint discussions, workshops and exercises in order to bring forward positive examples and solutions (see Appendix for a summary of the learning seminars). Instead of focusing on problems, the seminars gave opportunities to present, reflect upon and truly appreciate positive experiences and what was working well, not only within the individual company but within the other represented companies as well. The discussions were led by one or two members of the research team, providing input to the discussion, provoking thinking and making sure that the discussion were kept on track and that all had the opportunity to participate. The rest of the researchers had a supporting role, taking notes, reflecting upon what was said or handling the recording device. All discussions were audio recorded together with notes being taken. A summary of the discussions was sent to every participant after the seminars in order to keep the process alive and create a platform for the next seminar. At the end of each seminar, the topic for the next seminar was discussed with suggestions from both researchers and participants. Even though the final program for the seminars was decided by the research team, it was paramount to make the topics relevant to the practitioners in order to sustain commitment and practical relevance.

5. Experiences and lessons learned

The 'Learning in Networks' project provided several important lessons for future collaborative research projects. The first, and paramount for the success of similar projects, revolves around the constitution of the participant group and their individual motives for participating, i.e., the primacy of the constellation of the 'team' of firms rather than that of the researchers for the success of the collaborative research (Salmi, 2011). The participants were, in many cases, export salespersons from medium-sized companies. They are highly professional individuals, but have fewer opportunities for knowledge sharing within their own companies due to long periods of international travel and the limited sizes of their home companies. This made it attractive for the participants to be part of a network with professionals from other companies with similar experiences and challenges. A prerequisite for genuine sharing of experience and knowledge between the participants was openness and mutual trust. Most reported appreciative inquiry projects have been performed within the realms of single organizations, which is not to say that issues of mutual trust between colleagues and hierarchies are non-existent, but perhaps of another nature. In our case, a prerequisite was that the participating companies were not direct competitors, but were facing similar challenges. The size of the networking companies played a minor role; more important were the experiences of sympathy and the dynamic among the participants in order to create open, relevant, constructive and mutually rewarding discussions, a true 'communicative space' (Kemmis, 2001).

Second, an absolute necessity for a positive dynamic is the commitment from the individual participants and their home companies. They have to feel that participation in the MEE workshops is worthwhile. The participants are often very busy professionals, in this case often traveling internationally, and seldom with colleagues to replace them. At the same time, the dynamic and energy in the MEE discussions is built upon continuous participation which accumulates trust and knowledge in the network. It is therefore necessary to secure the firm commitments of both the individuals and their organizations before the start of the project. The relevance of the chosen themes (presented in the previous section) for the meetings was also stressed, even though it was the unexpected clashing of perspectives between professionals and researchers that was pointed out as most rewarding from both parties.

Following the first two lessons, a third lesson deals with the whole research team and the second research dilemma on divergent interests: The challenges of merging professionals' and researchers' goals and expectations of participating. This is a challenge acknowledged in much literature on collaborative research with outside organizations (Werr & Greiner, 2008). It is not only the obvious fact that professionals are interested in practically relevant knowledge for themselves and their firms, whereas researchers are interested in scientifically valid results that, at least regarding the extracted insights, stretch beyond the empirical examples at hand. It is very easy, according to our experience, for a collaborative research project to become unbalanced in one direction or the other. Either it gets an unbalanced focus in the direction of scientific interest, which distorts the genuine collaborative ambition of the project and pushes the companies and their representatives back into being mere research objects, leaving them with a feeling of lost relevance and utility; or, probably more common, in order to attract companies to participate, the projects tilt toward issues of almost solely practical interest. The issues discussed in the project might be of the highest relevance and priority for the companies and their representatives but might not represent new or robust empirical insights, perspectives or inspiration to the participating researchers. Participating partners might expect the academics to transfer their knowledge rather than taking part in knowledge development in which the academics act as facilitators and boundary subjects (Huzzard, Ahlberg, & Ekman, 2010) between the participants. One other issue is the often fundamental difference in temporal perspective between the professionals and the researchers. The professionals live in a reality which is constantly ongoing and changing, and their practical challenges and opportunities are often here and now. They often expect faster insight and return from participating in collaborative research projects than what is the normal pace of the scientific process, which reflection, writing and publishing can deliver. It is therefore important to be sensitive to the expectations of the participants and to give repeated feedback to the professionals in order to keep engagement (Bradbury-Huang, 2010), which at the same time as it might foster new discussions and reflections provides the opportunity for validation and refining of insights together with the participants. In our case, this was done by providing the participants with summaries of the discussions in between the seminars, as well as opening every seminar with a joint reflection on the previous one.

The fourth lesson relates to the more profound challenge expressed by the first dilemma: How to produce knowledge which is both scientifically valid and practically relevant. Following the constructionist epistemology of this approach, scientific validity takes another meaning compared to the neo-positivist research dominating much of IB. Instead of searching for objective data in order to build theory which is statistically generalizable beyond the study to a larger population, our aim is instead to create understanding, uncover hidden nuances of a phenomenon and theorizing those phenomena through *continuous exploration and refining* of theoretical constructs together with the participants. The studied phenomena are always situated within their specific contexts and the collaborative approach helps us to chisel out both the general and particular aspects of the studied phenomenon. Software such as NVivo may be of use to organize and analyze the qualitative data in order to increase scientific validity. Even though statistical generalization is neither the aim nor possible with the approach described in this paper, that does not imply that the results are only valid within the scope of the study. Through theoretical generalization (Silverman, 1993), propositions and models might be stretched to a wider domain with corresponding characteristics as the one being studied (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2008). In this study, this was done by extending the IP theory from mature to emerging markets. Seen from this perspective, collaborative research offers distinct possibilities to produce scientifically valid and trustworthy results. David and Hatchuel (2008) propose a framework to clarify the distinct roles of academics and organizations in the process of discovery/invention and to validate management models. Many management models have been discovered/invented by pioneering companies and later validated by academics. Other models have been discovered/invented by academics and later found practically useful and adopted by organizations. It is through the interplay between discovery/invention and validation/usefulness that the different roles of academics and organizations are made clear in collaborative research in order to simultaneously produce solutions that are both valid to several corresponding situations and are useful or actionable in a singular contextual situation (David & Hatchuel, 2008: 36). We concur with this framework and realize that, even though it resembles and is compatible with the abductive process, combining it with AI moves it beyond mere correspondence issues of validation and generalization to practical relevance. It is rather a process of mutual inquiry where collaborative research projects bring considerable potential to labeling, conceptualizing, and validating solutions and models being discovered and/or invented by practitioners through interaction with other practitioners in the MEE network, as well as practically refining preliminary models discovered/invented by academia through the comments and practical implementation by the participating partner organizations.

The fifth lesson deals with knowledge sharing within the participating companies. One of the goals of the 'Learning in Networks project' was that the joint production of knowledge should not only be to the benefit of the participants (professionals and researchers) but also to the companies that the participants represented. The lack of systematized arenas and opportunities for knowledge sharing within the companies that formed one of the reasons for participating in this learning network became visible once again when the knowledge was to be shared with a larger group of company members. The participants reported that it was done very informally. One of the reasons for this limited knowledge sharing relates to the reason for participation of SMEs. There are fewer fellow employees to share the new experience with, and the home activities are dominated by an operative focus with limited or no opportunities for reflection: 'Within our company our focus is on our daily activities and we never discuss soft issues like we have had the opportunity to do within this forum' (project participant). It could also be the result of a lack of resources for such activities, like one other participant noticed:

'Daily activities often dominate because of lack of time and personnel.' The knowledge sharing within each company could therefore be described as mostly informal, however existing, due to limited absorptive capacity and resources. It is therefore important that collaborative research projects like this support knowledge sharing and further exploitation of the gained insights within the participating firms. This often involves internal political challenges, illustrated by one of the participants: 'When I am convinced I have to convince others. I have to become a politician.' This lesson underlines the importance of creating learning mechanisms (Docherty & Shani, 2008) not only within the scientific inquiry process but also stretching beyond that to the participating organizations as well as the scientific community. To carefully and purposefully address the issues of enhanced and stretched learning mechanisms for experiential knowledge must be considered as a fundamental part of any collaborative research project.

6. Discussion and conclusion

Collaborative research, properly conducted, offers an interesting and potentially fruitful approach to push business research in general and IB research in particular forward. As a scientific approach, however, collaborative research is located in the crossroads between several interests and ideals, not necessarily compatible. Epistemologically, collaborative research breaks with the objectivist–positivist agenda dominating most IB research. Instead, it suggests a more pragmatist view of knowledge and knowledge development. Thus, it challenges several of the dominant paradigmatic assumptions within the field. At the same time, this break with the dominant logic within IB research also represents the most significant potential with the approach. Practitioners' knowledge development and learning is very often experiential and its use in practice pragmatic. Our approach of continuous theorizing together with practitioners have the potential of exploring and unrevealing the complexity and context-dependency of international business issues without imposing preconceived ideas and theoretical concepts. That said, we believe that collaborative research has several potential advantages to develop IB research also in comparison with other qualitative methodologies (Doz, 2011), such as interview based case-studies. First, it supports theory building by providing access to rich empirical data without having to do time-consuming ethnographic studies in the field and reduces the risk of being trapped in single theoretical lenses through the close interaction with practitioners without the same theoretical myopia. Working with groups of practitioners on specific topics and issues may counter-act some of the potential problems connected with qualitative interviews (Alvesson, 2003) and revealing some of the practitioners' theories in use (Argyris, 1976) rather than espoused theories. Second, it provides an opportunity for theory development and, to some extent, assessing and validating theories together with practitioners during the whole collaboration process through continuous exploration and refinement of theoretical constructs. Apart from most qualitative research in IB, such as case studies, the practitioners are not considered as subjects to be described or understood but as active partners in the theorizing efforts. Third, theory application can be illustrated with the help of examples from the participating practitioners, which may be used for communicating the results to both research and practical communities. Collaborative research is therefore not just another alternative method, it provides us with a methodology which helps us to close in on and understand the reality of business actors. Through the mutual interplay of discovery/invention and validation/usefulness, knowledge is produced that is both scientifically valid and practically meaningful and actionable. In this way, the interests of the scientific community, the practitioners and research funding institutes and the authorities may be met. Collaborative research, however, also brings new challenges to the research process. Apart from challenging widely held epistemological assumptions such as the ones mentioned above, it also requires a researcher skilled and interested in genuine interaction and collaboration with practitioners. To fulfill the full potential of collaborative research, and to merge the different interests and expectations involved, this interaction and collaboration must permeate the whole research process, from planning of the project, through execution, to post-project activities and perhaps also reporting of the results. This conclusion fits with Salmi (2011) on collective case research in IB: That collaborative research encompasses the whole research process. Our results even go deeper into this process by showing how such a research process works, e.g., how analysis is an integral part of it.

This paper makes the following contributions: First, we contribute to increasing the methodological pluralism in IB research by developing a collaborative type of action research: The MEE (mutual experience exchange) learning methodology built upon appreciative inquiry and taking place within an abductive research process. Up until now, the use of collaborative research methods in published IB studies on joint research with firms is almost non-existent. We argue that this kind of collaborative research has great potential for IB research and constitutes a significant addition to the development of qualitative methodologies, especially built upon a social constructionist epistemology, within the field. The purpose with collaborative research is to bridge the gap between scientifically valid and practically relevant results by extending the tradition of qualitative research in IB by viewing cases and working practitioners as subjects and partners instead of objects, and where the empirical research is issue-based and interactive rather than questionnaire-based and one-directional. Due to its action focus, this new methodology was found to be valid to study organizational learning processes, mainly to contribute to internationalization process theory regarding the key construct of experiential knowledge. Our understanding of it in general is increased, as well as how it works in a specific crisis-like situation. In particular, it extends our knowledge of joint learning of internationalizing SMEs in inter-organizational networks, and our knowledge of how exporters collaborate to extend their international experiential knowledge (Hilmersson & Jansson, 2012a, 2012b).

From a practical perspective, the major useful and relevant results for the participating SMEs produced by applying the AI methodology are intertwined with the approach itself. Collaborative research offers an opportunity and an arena for self-reflection, knowledge sharing and validation, in our case not only with the researchers but also with practitioners from other companies. It was this opportunity and being part of the process that was most highly valued by the participants. From the perspective of the participants, the other participating practitioners were in a unique position to contribute with appreciative comments and reflections as part of the same community of practice. This fact also contributes to overall knowledge development, since the practitioners may very well open up issues not considered from a researcher's point of view, once again exemplifying the value of collaborative research methodologies in research.

Second, we make a more general methodological contribution regarding collaborative research based upon appreciative inquiry. AI has been used or suggested for several developmental and research purposes, including strategic planning (Stavros, Cooperrider, & Kelley, 2008), but not, to our knowledge, within the framework of international business research. Our proposed methodology, and the study in relation to which it was developed, therefore contributes to further broadening the area where collaborative research in general and appreciative inquiry in particular may be applied. Furthermore, and more important, is the fact that even though appreciative inquiry has been used within several different contexts, such as single formal organizations as well as more loosely organized settings such as cities, the MEE methodology highlighted the possibility of applying AI within a formed network of otherwise independent actors. Especially when developing and studying small and medium-sized organizations through AI, this seems potentially rewarding. Our study contributes by suggesting such a method and reflecting upon its challenges and possibilities.

However, further methodological development and empirical studies are necessary in order to establish collaborative research to develop both pragmatically relevant knowledge and valid IB theory by using AI-based approaches such as this one in particular. The usefulness as well as the limitations of collaborative research within the field of IB could be the focus of especially devoted tracks within conferences or in the form of special issues of journals and thereby furthering the valuable contribution of the special issues on qualitative methodology mentioned in this paper. We especially recommend studies and reports that address how to stretch and confirm the learning developed through participation in AI networks from the individual participants to their organizations by developing the learning mechanisms for both representative and pragmatic reasons, which to some extent were missing in our study. Organizational learning theory, combined with broad experience with collaborative research, could probably lead the way. Further development in this direction would most certainly help unleash the full practical potential of collaborative research within networks of company professionals as well as in theory development. As this methodological approach represents a new development of research methodology, especially within IB, we also propose that future teaching of research methodology should include collaborative research approaches, their scientific foundations and practical executions, to the benefit of both theory development and practical relevance.

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Appendix A

Summary of the MEE-learning seminars.

	Stage in the AI-cycle	Overall theme	Summary of discussion
1st seminar	Discovery (appreciating opportunities and what is working well)	Company strengths and possibilities during the prevailing economic crisis	Economic crisis as an opportunity to find new suppliers and customers, secure favorable long-term contracts, to slim the organization and try new ways of working and doing business. Slack in the organization can be used for development projects. Fewer competitors after the crisis.
2nd seminar	Discovery/dream (positive envisioning of what might be)	Customer value and positive examples of creation of value with customers in foreign markets	What is/creates customer value in your industry? In what way does the customers contribute to value creation? How can customer expectations be noticed? The influence of cultural differences? The importance of understanding different needs and expectations in different stages of the value chain.
3rd seminar	Dream/design (co-constructing a desirable future)	What would an optimal information and learning system look like in order to ensure customer orientation?	An optimal system should be open for information which is useful but also unexpected, diverse, rich, valid and future oriented. It should encourage novel thinking and cross-functional analysis, external analysis and easy distribution to the right person. It should support fast and efficient action.
4th seminar	Design/destiny (design measures to reach desired future through mobilizing collective energy)	Efficient implementation, how to increase learning and improve financial results	Presentation of a real life case concerning a change project in one of the participating companies. Joint discussion of change processes: what makes them work and successful according to experience and research? Presentation of actual results from the change project, what lessons can be learned for the future?
5th seminar	Destiny (designing measures to reach desired future through mobilizing collective energy)	Creativity and novel thinking in business activities	Reflection upon situations when the participants thought they or their companies was creative and what facilitated this creativity. What is a creative environment and how to create it. Different forms of creativity, including artistic. Different forms of innovation (products, processes, organization, management, markets, services, etc.) and concrete positive examples from experience.
6th seminar	Destiny (designing measures to reach desired future through mobilizing collective energy)	Lessons learned since the beginning of the project	In reference to the first seminar, in what way has the crisis been a source of possibilities: Better cost efficiency, changed market focus to emerging markets (particularly China, India, Korea), more focus on high-margin customers and products, less competition, new innovations because of free capacity. What has been rewarding with participating in the research project and how has the gained insight been communicated in the organization.

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