

Entering the ivory tower: A farmer's perspective

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Abstract

Transformation can be interpreted in various ways by different people. When I hear the word 'transformation,' I think of my own personal transformation throughout my doctoral studies. In this piece, I reflect on what I regard as the process of transformation in becoming an academic researcher. The 'ivory tower' metaphor is often used to express the disconnected life of an academic. In this metaphor, it is regarded as a somewhat less real and almost protected world, where academics are in some ways viewed as elitists who do not experience the same everyday realities facing 'proper' workers. In this essay, I reflect on my own transformational experience of entering the so-called 'ivory tower,' discussing the misconceptions around this metaphor from a farmer's perspective. I suggest that business and management scholars should bridge the gap between academic theory and practice, engaging in empirical research that practically connects academia with farming communities. Doing this allows academics to challenge the metaphor and leave their ivory towers.

Reflection

Transformation can be interpreted in various ways by different people. This piece focuses on my own personal transformation throughout my doctoral studies. In this essay, I reflect on what I regard as the process of transformation in becoming an academic researcher. I discuss how I have entered the so-called 'ivory tower' coming from a working farming background. Different interpretations around the metaphor are discussed, arguing that both academia and farming communities can benefit mutually from knowledge exchanges.

The 'ivory tower' is often used to theorize the lives in which academics live (Shapin, 2012). The metaphor has a somewhat cynical and derogatory tone, implying that scholars are considered elitists, seeking residence inside a protective tower away from society and pursuing knowledge for knowledge's sake. Those who 'look in' reside outside the tower walls of academia (i.e., farmers), and those who 'look out' live inside the tower (i.e., academics) interpret academia differently from one another. In the following sections, I discuss how I have transformed throughout my doctoral studies, moving from an outsider 'looking in' as a farmer to now 'looking out' as an academic.

Personally, I feel my life has transformed since entering the world of academia. Before pursuing my doctoral studies, I mistakenly viewed academia as an ivory tower. As I deepened into my studies, I realised how unaware I was of the complexities of academic life. The competitive job market, uncertain work contracts, failed grant proposals, 'publish or perish' culture and expert level understanding of subjects are often not realised by those 'looking in.'

Indeed, transforming from a farm worker to a PhD student had its challenges. While my parents are proud of my academic accomplishments and ambitions, they do not understand

past the financial reasons in pursuing an academic career. I am the first in my family to pursue a doctoral degree and to them, while they have every faith in me selecting it as a career path, they still have absolutely no idea what I do. I am still in school in my parents' eyes, with them being unaware that a PhD is often a requirement to secure full-time academic employment. Personally, I find the intellectual pursuit and freedom to research topics the most rewarding reason for entering academia, but this is hardly comprehensible to my parents. Nonetheless, this farming upbringing continues to be a fundamental part of my research into farm entrepreneurship. This unique positionality allows me to build on the small body of research that reflects on the academic implications behind empirically understanding farm business management practices (McElwee, 2008).

While my farming parents struggle to grasp what academia is. Many academics struggle to understand farming, with farming contexts in business and management research remaining underexplored (Fitz-Koch et al., 2018). Academics often treat farmers as homogeneous social groups, with only those that have physically experienced living and working in farming communities understanding their heterogeneous nature. Many individuals outside of farming fail to realise the multiple identities farmers construct to run successful farming businesses. Farmers do not simply farm land. They are entrepreneurs, strategists, agronomists, mechanics, accountants, builders, shopkeepers, conservationists and parents. Academics often overlook the various identities farmers construct.

Some may consider the two worlds (farming and academia) miles apart. I am lucky enough to have experienced both sides. I know of few academics with manual labouring backgrounds, with even fewer farmers having PhD's. However, I believe that academia and farming communities can benefit from mutual exchanges with one another. Farmers might benefit from academic research which practically engages with them, whereby the findings can be used at the farm level, such as by improving the economic performance of their businesses. While academics can benefit from practically engaging with farmers, producing more practice-orientated research to understand farming systems, businesses, and lifestyles. Academics can then leverage their positions of power to help make fundamental changes to agricultural, rural and environmental policies, which in turn impact the daily lives of farmers.

Indeed, some farmers I have spoken with have not experienced positive encounters with academic researchers. One farmer recently told me of a research student with a 'hidden activist agenda' who used deceptive tactics to damage the image of the farming sector. These negative encounters could explain why some academics (i.e., outsiders) struggle to engage with farming communities (Kuehne, 2016). Farming communities are close-knit, often cautious of outsiders unfamiliar with rural and farming life. Being mindful of this and disclosing my farming background certainly enabled me to access data from farmers. Perhaps universities could benefit from employing more researchers with agricultural backgrounds to overcome access issues in farming research contexts.

However, I feel the 'ivory tower' metaphor is not readily applicable to my research, perhaps due to my practical working experience, which has steered my research in the direction of empiricism. While it contains theoretical and philosophical debates, my research relies strongly on empirical data that proposes both practical and policy-based contributions.

These contributions can be communicated and understood by farmers. Arguably, the ivory tower metaphor is more applicable to conceptual studies, whereby individuals and those 'looking in' (i.e., farmers) do not realise its value.

Being connected to the family farm and immersed in rural life has allowed me to construct multiple identities, shaping the way I carry out academic research on agricultural businesses. Reflecting upon my transformational experience of entering academia from a farming background allows me to make a methodological contribution to my research field, showing other rural research scholars the positives and negatives associated with carrying out farming research as an 'industry insider.' I use methods that scholars often overlook, such as using ad-hoc conversations, photographs, and a research diary to collect data that arise from spontaneous interactions with farmers influenced by my insider positionality.

I have found that conducting empirical work allows me to engage with farmers and deliver tangible benefits. I was also surprised by the number of farmers who wanted to read about the results of my research. While the findings of my work are disseminated in the form of academic journal articles, I make sure that they are also accessible to farmers. I share shortened summaries of my work in online farming chat platforms, alongside discuss my research with farmers in person when working out in the field. Doing this has allowed me to show farmers that not all academics live in ivory towers.

In summary, the world of academia is as theoretical or as practice-orientated as one wants to believe. There is a strong practical element in the context of my research, which does not coincide with the ivory tower metaphor. I am not researching alone in my ivory tower, more often than not I am on the farm with the farmer, listening to them and seeing how my research can improve their situation. I have drawn upon my positionality and used it to guide my research, allowing me to carry out research that makes academic, practical and policy-related contributions. However, there are still practices in academia that fit the metaphor, such as research that lacks practical application, alongside studies published in highly specialised journals that are read by only a select few in the academic circles (i.e., ivory tower).

Scholars should make more efforts to leave their ivory towers, encouraging public engagement and making work more readily available to non-specialist audiences. Academics should better communicate how their research helps farmers, as many are unaware of what academics do, with disconnections occurring between academia, policy and practice (Phoenix et al., 2019). Business and management scholars should, in particular, attempt to bridge the gap between academic theory and practice and communicate their findings simply so those in practice roles (i.e. farmers and other agricultural stakeholders) can understand the benefits of engagement between academia and practice. Academics with practical working backgrounds can offer value to farmers, alongside utilise their knowledge to contribute further to management research into farming contexts. Reflecting upon my own transformational experience of becoming an academic through the 'ivory tower' metaphor has shown my working background's important role in my academic career. Moreover, it has made me think about how business and management scholars should seek transformation away from their ivory towers and do more to engage practically with farming communities.

References

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