

## Viewpoint

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## The theory-practice gap in Tehran's urban planning and management: an epistemological pathology of previous research

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### Abstract

The theory-practice gap in urban management and planning in Iran, particularly in Tehran, has led to urban management and planning theories remaining extensively theoretical, not supporting urban management practices. This has resulted in costly, time-consuming trial-and-error processes. This study aims to identify relevant research addressing the theory-practice gap in urban management and planning, utilizing an epistemological pathology approach. Furthermore, it seeks to propose solutions for the accurate redefinition and reformulation of the issue concerning the theory-practice gap within the context of Tehran. The research methodology was chosen in alignment with the established objectives and research questions, employing a critical evaluation grounded in a synthesis of the evaluation frameworks proposed by Jung and Solomon, as well as Alvesson and Sandberg. The statistical sample for this study encompasses all research conducted regarding the theory-practice gap in urban management and planning in Iran and Tehran. A sample comprising 38% of the statistical population, equivalent to 15 documented research works, was selected for critical evaluation. The findings of this study indicate that research within this domain has not succeeded in establishing new methodological and epistemological frameworks to bridge the gap. This shortcoming arises from a failure to critically interrogate the theoretical assumptions inherent in dominant urban management paradigms as well as from a lack of theoretical comprehensiveness and intellectual diversity. Consequently, this has led to inconsistencies in the presentation of evidence and results.

### Keywords

Local experience and development theory  
Theoretical epistemology  
Theory-practice gap  
Tehran  
Urban management

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## 1. Introduction

The theory-practice gap in the urban management and planning systems constitutes one of the most fundamental and persistent challenges in Iran. As Imani-Shamlou and Raffeeian (2020) argue, the emergence of this gap over the past century has made the complexities of urban planning and management, particularly in developing countries such as Iran, more visible. These complexities are conspicuous in contexts where imported theories of urban planning and management are predominantly employed. Consequently, the need to pay closer attention to substantive issues and to critically engage with the philosophical foundations of the theory-practice gap in urban planning and management has become increasingly evident in such countries.

Alexander (2010) contends that this gap is essentially unbridgeable, arguing that theories of urban planning and management are primarily produced by theorists who show little interest in the practical application of their own ideas. In contrast, some planning scholars, including Harris (2000), maintain that this gap tends to benefit urban theorists more than practitioners. Unlike Alexander, Harris argues that the gap is, in fact, bridgeable. Scholars aligned with this perspective, including Watson et al. (2020), suggest that over recent decades the theoretical domain of urban management, at least in certain respects such as urban planning, has moved closer to practice. Concern over the theory-practice gap in urban planning and management is not limited to Iran. Instead, it is a global issue. Numerous scholars across different countries (e.g., Pissourios, 2013; Saiu, 2020; Palermo, 2024) have critically examined prevailing approaches to understanding this gap, emphasizing the need for alternative epistemological and methodological frameworks.

Within the urban planning literature, John Friedmann is among the earliest theorists to have seriously addressed the gap between theory and practice. In his model of social reform planning, and later in his articulation of structural problem-oriented planning, Friedmann demonstrates how planning at the theoretical level presents a coherent, rational, and future-oriented vision, while in practice it becomes entangled with political forces, group interests, organizational constraints, and power structures. From his perspective, this gap is intensified when planning adopts a technocratic orientation and treats the city as a set of technical problems. In contrast, urban issues are, in reality, fundamentally socio-

political in nature. For this reason, Friedmann emphasizes participatory planning and citizen empowerment as mechanisms through which practice may be brought closer to theory (Friedmann, 1993).

Similarly, Jürgen Habermas, through his theory of communicative action and his distinction between instrumental rationality and communicative rationality, provides a framework for an in-depth understanding of the theory-practice gap in urban planning. In Habermas's view, many planning failures stem from the dominance of instrumental rationality: planners and managers prioritize efficiency, control, and measurable outputs, while the lifeworld of citizens is grounded in dialogue, mutual understanding, values, and qualitative needs. When planning processes unfold without genuine dialogue with social groups, theory (plans, policies, and documents) becomes detached from practice (everyday life, actual use of space, and social resistance) (Habermas, 1996).

Nevertheless, a factor that further deepens and complicates this challenge in Iran's urban management system, particularly in Tehran, is the imported nature of many urban planning and management theories. These theories have neither been developed within indigenous contexts nor grounded in Iran's specific cultural, political, social, and economic conditions. Moreover, in practice, they have often been implemented through multiple interpretations, sometimes even contradictory to their original intentions, resulting in counterproductive outcomes. A clear example can be found in the comprehensive urban planning model, which has dominated the planning and management of physical urban development in Iranian cities for decades (Pazhuan, 2023). In addition, as Samanpour (2022) argues, formal urban planning in Iran lacks the flexibility required to incorporate local experience. Consequently, the influence of informal and practice-based knowledge produced by local actors has received limited attention. This rigidity is itself a defining characteristic of Iran's urban management system (Moghaddam & Rafieian, 2020; Farhoodi et al., 2009). These structural and institutional shortcomings further underscore the necessity of addressing the theory-practice gap within Iran's specific political, social, economic, and managerial context.

Alongside these issues, a relatively widespread public distrust in science, and the growing influence of the notion, particularly among urban managers and policymakers, that urban planning theories are incapable of addressing complex and multidimensional

problems in developing countries such as Iran, has further distanced urban planning and management theories from practical policymaking. This trend has fostered a harmful form of ad hoc and discretionary management, characterized by momentary decision-making without solid scientific or professional foundations. Moreover, the temporal lag of urban planning and management theories behind the rapidly evolving realities of megacities such as Tehran, where macro-level factors, including technological change, shifting social needs, and economic uncertainties, exert swift and profound impacts, has intensified the need for more responsive theoretical and practical approaches. In Tehran, the absence of an effective bridge between theory and practice across the city's intertwined domains has significantly increased the costs of urban management, while simultaneously amplifying public dissatisfaction with the performance of urban governance institutions. Furthermore, this gap has led to the production and reproduction of economic inefficiencies in Tehran's urban management system, including high costs of urban maintenance and development, waste of national and local resources, unjustifiable delays in development projects, and rising costs of urban services (Mirzakhani et al., 2021; Ghasemi, 2018).

In essence, the epistemological costs of the theory–practice gap in Tehran's urban management system, stemming, on the one hand, from trial-and-error implementation of imported theories and the allocation of substantial financial resources to their execution, and on the other hand, from the neglect of local experience and indigenous and practice-based knowledge, have collectively created a situation in which Tehran is both extremely expensive to govern and simultaneously characterized by low levels of citizen satisfaction with the quality of public services. Against this backdrop, and to provide a rigorous scholarly examination of the theory–practice gap in Tehran's urban management system, the primary objective of the present study is to assess the extent to which previous research has addressed the philosophical dimensions of this gap, employing a critical evaluation approach. Unlike earlier studies that have addressed the theory–practice gap as merely an implementation-related deficiency, this study conceptualizes it as an epistemological and ontological shortcoming embedded within dominant paradigms. Accordingly, the main objective of this research is to conduct an epistemological and ontological critique of existing studies, while its secondary objective is to

propose a conceptual framework for the rearticulation of the problem in Tehran's urban management. In line with these objectives, the study addresses two research questions: (1) What epistemological and ontological shortcomings are embedded in studies that have examined the theory–practice gap in urban planning and management? (2) What conceptual framework is required to reformulate this problem in the context of Tehran's urban management?

## 2. Materials and methods

Given its objectives and research questions, the present study employs a critical evaluation approach to examine a selected body of prior research. In terms of its overall nature, this study can therefore be classified as meta-theoretical research. The choice of a critical evaluation approach is directly aligned with the aims of the study. Since the article seeks to assess both the content and structure of previous research addressing the remediation of the theory–practice gap in Tehran's urban management system, it requires a method that is simultaneously evaluative and critical in orientation. For this reason, critical evaluation is considered the most appropriate methodological approach for the present inquiry. Accordingly, the study first reviews the dominant frameworks of critical evaluation and subsequently selects the framework that best corresponds to its research objectives.

## 3. Critical review of text evaluation frameworks

Critical evaluation of scholarly research across different fields generally follows three broad categories of approaches (Yin, 2014; Creswell, 2013): formal–methodological approaches, discursive and meaning-oriented approaches, and historical–contextual approaches. According to Yin, formal approaches primarily focus on structural quality, logical coherence, the alignment between research questions and methods, and the validity of data, seeking to evaluate studies based on standardized methodological criteria (Yin, 2014). In contrast, discursive approaches—such as critical discourse analysis—concentrate on examining meaning-making frameworks, underlying assumptions, and power mechanisms embedded within academic texts. Historical approaches, meanwhile, situate research within broader scientific, institutional, and social transformations, emphasizing the historical conditions under which knowledge is produced.

Despite the importance of these approaches, as Creswell also argues, each enables only a particular

type of evaluation and—due to the limited scope of their analytical focus—generally fails to simultaneously integrate formal methodological assessment with paradigmatic and ontological critique (Creswell, 2013). For instance, while discourse analysis is effective in uncovering power relations and implicit meaning structures, it tends to devote less attention to methodological coherence, argumentative rigor, and the overall quality of research design. Conversely, historical critique is well-suited to explaining the context of knowledge production but lacks the capacity to analyze the epistemological or methodological foundations of research systematically. As a result, these approaches are insufficient for conducting a comprehensive and multi-layered critical evaluation—particularly in fields like urban planning and management, where both methodological sensitivities and theoretical paradigmatic considerations are of central importance.

Within this context, the frameworks proposed by Young and Solomon—designed for the formal and methodological assessment of research quality—and by Alvesson and Sandberg—focused on epistemological and ontological critique—offer the potential to bridge the gap between these two major analytical traditions. The former framework enables a systematic examination of the structural components of research, from problem formulation to methodological choice and logical coherence. The latter moves beyond technical evaluation to uncover paradigmatic assumptions, conceptions of reality, and the

epistemological foundations underpinning the researcher’s perspective. The integration of these two approaches, which effectively functions as a dual-dimensional critical checklist, is more comprehensive and aligned with the objectives of the present study than singular approaches such as discourse or historical critique. This is because the theory–practice gap in urban management entails both conceptual–paradigmatic dimensions and methodological and design-related issues in prior research. Accordingly, the following sections examine and analyze these two frameworks in greater detail.

According to Young and Solomon, critical appraisal is a systematic process used to identify the strengths and weaknesses of previous studies and to assess the usefulness and validity of their findings. From their perspective, the most important components of critical appraisal are the evaluation of the appropriateness of the study design in relation to the research question and a careful assessment of the key methodological characteristics of that design. In addition, they emphasize several other factors that should be taken into account, including the suitability of the statistical methods employed and their subsequent interpretation, the presence of potential conflicts of interest, and the relevance of the research to the reader’s own professional practice (Young & Solomon, 2009).

Young and Solomon propose a ten-step guide for the critical appraisal of research, consisting of ten key questions (Figure 1)

1. Is the research question relevant?
2. Does the study add anything new?
3. What type of research question is being asked?
4. Was the study design appropriate for the research question?
5. Have the study methods addressed the most important potential sources of bias?
6. Was the study conducted in accordance with the original protocol?
7. Does the study test the stated hypothesis?
8. Were the statistical analyses conducted appropriately?
9. Do the data justify the conclusions?
10. Are there any actual or potential conflicts of interest?

Figure 1. Ten key questions in the Young and Solomon critical appraisal framework (Young & Solomon, 2009)

Alvesson and Sandberg propose problematization as a critical methodological approach aimed at identifying, distinguishing, and challenging the underlying assumptions surrounding a research topic. They argue that claims such as “existing research is incomplete,” “important perspectives have been overlooked,” or “there are gaps in the literature that need to be filled.”

At the same time, they may create opportunities for further research, but ultimately fail to make a substantive contribution to existing knowledge. This is because such claims do not fundamentally challenge the core assumptions embedded in prior studies and, as a result, are incapable of generating genuinely novel research questions. From Alvesson and Sandberg’s

perspective, challenging the assumptions and cognitive frameworks of an existing paradigm or viewpoint through problematization constitutes the most crucial step in critical evaluation. In this way, rather than relying on pre-formulated questions, the researcher engages in problematization through a dialectical confrontation with multiple perspectives, systematically questioning taken-for-granted assumptions and, in doing so, generating new and meaningful research questions (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011).

Several domestic studies have also sought to adapt this framework to the context of public sector management. For example, Hosseini et al. (2023), through an examination of the framework proposed by Alvesson and Sandberg, conclude that this approach can substantially contribute to understanding the issues that governmental and public organizations in Iran frame as “problems.” This is particularly significant in the Iranian context, where public policies are not primarily responses to problems that require resolution. Instead, they frequently function as mechanisms that generate new problems or exacerbate existing ones.

Similarly, Sarafi (2025), in a recent study, employs the problematization framework as a method for critically

evaluating the dominant ontological and epistemological assumptions underlying processes of urban and regional unsustainability in Iran. Figure 2 presents an outline of the methodology proposed by Alvesson and Sandberg.

Given that the framework proposed by Young and Solomon is designed to assess the scientific quality and methodological content of research, and that the framework by Alvesson and Sandberg facilitates ontological and epistemological critical appraisal, their combined use provides a comprehensive framework that aligns closely with the objectives of the present study. Compared to other approaches—such as discourse analysis or historical critique—this integrated framework is considered superior. Furthermore, due to the limited scope of any single method, including discourse or historical critique, the present study employs a combined framework to conduct a critical evaluation of prior research addressing the theory–practice gap in urban management in Iran (Tehran). Accordingly, the data analysis tool consists of a structured, dual-dimensional framework derived from Young and Solomon and Alvesson and Sandberg, functioning as a two-pronged critical checklist (formal/methodological critique and paradigmatic critique).

*A typology of assumptions evaluated through the problematization approach:*

- **Foundational assumptions** underpinning schools of thought.
- **Root metaphors**, understood as overarching representations of a specific phenomenon that shape the state of the art
- **Paradigms**, including the ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions embedded in the research literature.
- **Ideology**, encompassing the political, ethical, and normative assumptions underlying prior studies.
- **Field- or domain-level assumptions**, referring to assumptions about specific issues that are shared across different theories and schools of thought.

*Principles for identifying and challenging assumptions with the aim of generating new research questions:*

- Delineating the scope of the literature, including the configuration of texts and key findings.
- Identifying and explicating the core assumptions upon which dominant theories and schools of thought rely.
- Critically evaluating these assumptions and assessing the feasibility of challenging them.
- Developing alternative assumptions and exploring alternative ways of conceptualizing the phenomenon.
- Assessing the persuasiveness and legitimacy of the newly proposed assumptions among the audience

**Figure 2. The critical appraisal methodology proposed by Alvesson and Sandberg (Alvesson & Sandberg,2011)**

To ensure the validity of the combined critical appraisal tool, the draft checklist and coding process were reviewed by two expert faculty members specializing

in qualitative methodology and critical planning. Based on their feedback, the content and structural validity of the combined tool were confirmed. To further

ensure reliability of the analysis, all sampled articles were independently coded and evaluated by two members of the research team (the author and a colleague) using the combined framework. The inter-coder agreement in identifying critiques and underlying assumptions exceeded 90%, indicating a high level of consistency in the coding process. To critically evaluate research related to the theory–practice gap in urban management in Tehran, a systematic search was first conducted across various academic and citation databases, including Google Scholar (Persian), the Scientific Information Database (SID), the journals of Tehran University, Tarbiat Modares University, Shahid Beheshti University, Noor Journals, and Elmnet. The search employed the following keywords: “theory–practice gap in Iran,” “theory–practice gap in urban management,” “pragmatism in urban management in Iran and Tehran,” “urban management in Tehran and the theory–practice gap,” “remediation of the theory–practice gap in urban management,” “bridging the theory–practice gap in urban management,” “disconnect between theory and action,” and “science–practice gap in Tehran’s urban management.” The search period was unrestricted, recognizing the limited availability of literature on the topic within Iran. The initial search output, after preliminary screening (e.g., removing items unrelated to urban management), included 39 articles, research projects, and technical reports, which were then reviewed based on their titles and abstracts and subsequently

retained as the final candidate dataset. In the next stage, three criteria were applied as final filters to select the sample for critical evaluation. These three criteria include:

- a) the study’s focus on the theory–practice gap;
- b) relevance to urban issues;
- c) and inclusion of proposals or recommendations for bridging the theory–practice gap.

Applying these three criteria resulted in the selection of 15 articles and technical reports for the critical evaluation phase. The preliminary search results were also passed through these filters to ensure that repeating the filtering process would yield the same outcome, confirming the robustness of the selection procedure. An important consideration was that, although increasing the sample size could enhance the validity of the results, initial assessments indicated that including additional studies that did not meet the three main criteria would undermine the credibility of the evaluation process and could negatively affect the outcomes of the critical appraisal. Furthermore, some of the selected articles, while not explicitly focused on Tehran, were deemed eligible due to: (a) meeting all three selection criteria, and (b) having indirect relevance and impact on Tehran as well as topic-specific significance. Consequently, the sample size of 15 articles was deemed sufficient, achieving theoretical saturation with respect to paradigmatic critique and the extraction of all critical themes according to the Alvesson and Sandberg framework. Figure 1 presents the methodological process of the study.

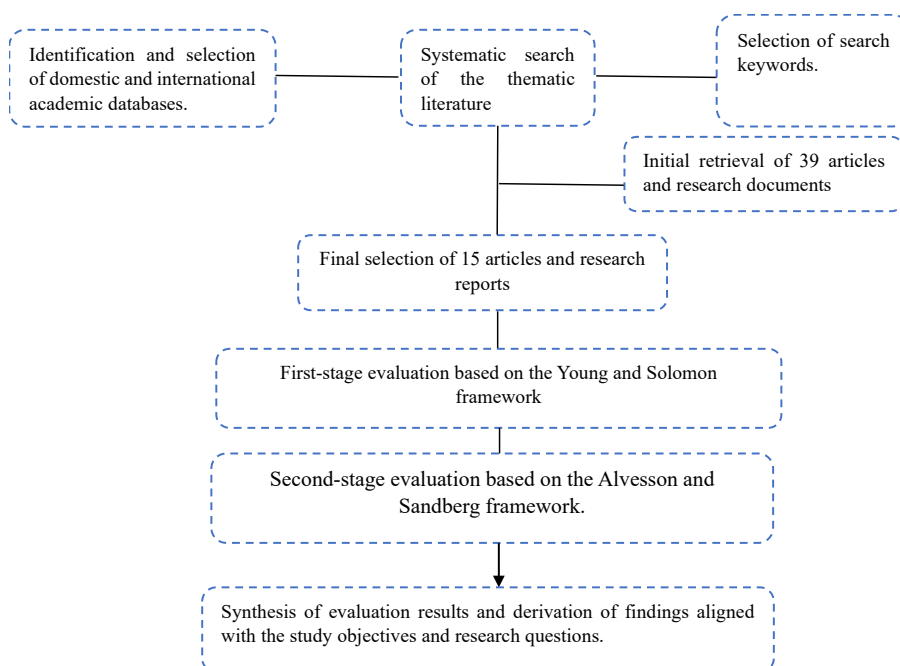


Figure 3. Methodological process for selecting and evaluating research samples

#### 4. Content analysis process

Once the analytical tool and sample size were determined, the next step involved qualitative content analysis of the selected studies. Each article, research project, or study was studied as a unit of analysis. The 15 selected studies were initially categorized according to the combined critical appraisal framework. First, the methodological rigor and depth of content of each study were critically evaluated using the Young and Solomon framework. Subsequently, conceptual categorization was conducted based on the typology of assumptions proposed in the problematization approach by Alvesson and Sandberg. Finally, the assumptions embedded in the selected studies were identified and critically challenged with a view to generating new research questions, following the five guiding principles of the problematization methodology. In other words, each unit of analysis was carefully examined, and the various sections of the study, from abstract to conclusion, were assessed according to the ten key questions of Young and Solomon, organized under thematic categories. During this process, thematic categories were filtered through the Young and Solomon framework to determine the appropriateness of the study design and the key methodological characteristics of each unit. The units were then re-categorized according to the typology of assumptions suggested by Alvesson and Sandberg, to understand the underlying theoretical and conceptual assumptions of each study. Finally, the ontological and epistemological findings and implications of the studies were critically examined based on the five principles of problematization.

#### 5. Paradigmatic analysis and critical meta-evaluation

In this section, the critical appraisal of the selected studies is conducted based on the combined framework of Young and Solomon and Alvesson and Sandberg. It is essential to note that the evaluation process was designed according to the ten key questions of Young and Solomon and the criteria proposed by Alvesson and Sandberg.

Initially, using the Young and Solomon framework, the studies were assessed to identify their strengths and weaknesses, as well as the usefulness and validity of their findings. Following this, the Alvesson and Sandberg framework was applied to examine the underlying assumptions of the studies and their capacity to formulate new research questions and provide novel perspectives for bridging the theory–practice gap in urban management in Tehran.

In other words, the critical appraisal process in the present study is two-staged: assessment of methodological rigor and key characteristics of the study design based on the Young and Solomon framework and problematization and paradigmatic evaluation, examining the studies' ability to engage dialectically with diverse perspectives and to address the theory–practice gap in Tehran's urban management, based on Alvesson and Sandberg's criteria. Tables 1 and 2 present the selected studies along with the results of the critical appraisal. Table 1 summarizes the formal/methodological evaluation according to the Young and Solomon framework, while Table 2 provides the content- and paradigm-based evaluation following the Alvesson and Sandberg framework.

**Table 1: Formal assessment of previous studies based on the Jung–Solomon framework**

The research title	Young & Solomon 10-step guide
"A critique of the gap between theory and practice in the modern-positivist paradigm in management and organization" (Abdollahi & Mohammadi, 2017)	Is the study question relevant? Yes – focused on the theory–practice gap.
	Does the study add something new? Yes – potential root causes of the gap are explored, and specific weaknesses of the positivist paradigm, particularly the separation of theory from practice, are critically examined.
	What type of research question is asked? Exploratory
	Was the study design appropriate for the research question? Yes – the study includes major methodological elements, such as a principled problem design, precise research question, and structured study framework.
	Did the study address primary potential sources of bias? No
	Was the study conducted according to the original protocol (including research questions, hypotheses, methods, etc.)?
	Partially – some limitations, such as limited depth in problem formulation and insufficient analytical treatment of critical theory, were noted.
	Does the study test the stated hypothesis? Yes
	Were statistical analyses conducted correctly? –
	Do the data support the results? –
Were there any conflicts of interest or potential for them? No	

“Sustainable development: from policy-making to practice (explaining the model of public policy gap in the environmental domain)” (Rezaei et al., 2023)	Is the study question relevant?	Yes – the research focuses on how to bridge the theory–practice gap.
	Does the study add something new?	Yes – it proposes a model for bridging the gap.
	What type of research question is asked?	Exploratory
	Was the study design appropriate for the research question?	Yes – the study design and structure are appropriate.
	Did the study address primary potential sources of bias?	No
	Was the study conducted according to the original protocol (including research questions, hypotheses, methods, etc.)?	Partially – some limitations were noted, such as a weak review of prior research and global literature.
	Does the study test the stated hypothesis?	Yes – the research questions were addressed.
	Were statistical analyses conducted correctly?	Yes – a valid structural equation modeling (sem) approach was used, and the data are reliable.
	Do the data support the results?	Yes, given the high validity and reliability of the model.
	Were there any conflicts of interest or potential for them?	No

“Assessment of research process mechanisms in Tehran municipality and proposing practical solutions” (Jalili-Sadrabad & Sanjideh, 2022)	Is the study question relevant?	No – the study does not explicitly state a research question.
	Does the study add something new?	Yes – it provides methods and strategies to bring the theory and practice domains closer together in the Tehran municipality.
	What type of research question is asked?	Not applicable – no explicit research question.
	Was the study design appropriate for the research question?	Partially – although there is no formal research question, the primary concern of bridging the theory–practice gap in Tehran municipality was central to the study.
	Did the study address primary potential sources of bias?	No
	Was the study conducted according to the original protocol (including research questions, hypotheses, methods, etc.)?	Partially, the study lacked explicit questions and hypotheses.
	Does the study test the stated hypothesis?	No
	Were statistical analyses conducted correctly?	Not applicable – the study used qualitative methods, reviewing and evaluating documents and processes.
	Do the data support the results?	Yes
	Were there any conflicts of interest or potential for them?	No

“Assessment of research role and utilization in urban management: a case study of Tehran urban management system” (Alvani et al., 2018)	Is the study question relevant?	No – the study does not explicitly state a research question.
	Does the study add something new?	Yes – by identifying dysfunctional loops in the urban research supply-demand system, it proposes a model to bridge the theory–practice gap.
	What type of research question is asked?	Not applicable – no explicit research question.
	Was the study design appropriate for the research question?	Partially – although the study lacks a formal question or hypothesis, it uses a structured and coherent methodology to examine the topic.
	Did the study address major potential sources of bias?	No
	Was the study conducted according to the original protocol (including research questions, hypotheses, methods, etc.)?	Yes – except for the absence of an explicit question and hypothesis, other research standards were followed.
	Does the study test the stated hypothesis?	No
	Were statistical analyses conducted correctly?	–
	Do the data support the results?	–
	Were there any conflicts of interest or potential for them?	No

The research title Young & Solomon 10-step guide

<p>“How can Iranian popular institutions reform urban planning? A case study in Shush neighborhood” (Samanpour, 2022)</p>	Is the study question relevant?	Yes – the title itself is question-oriented, and this question forms the central methodological and epistemological focus of the study.
	Does the study add something new?	Yes – using qualitative methods and multiple pieces of evidence, it demonstrates the effectiveness of informal institutions in bridging theory and practice in the regeneration of deteriorated urban fabrics.
	What type of research question is asked?	Exploratory
	Was the study design appropriate for the research question?	Yes – the study follows a rigorous qualitative design, including an appropriate research plan, detailed methodology, and presentation of findings and evidence.
	Did the study address primary potential sources of bias?	No – the study shows some bias towards specific theories, e.g., Giddens’ structuration theory.
	Was the study conducted according to the original protocol (including research questions, hypotheses, methods, etc.)?	Yes – qualitative research standards were followed.
	Does the study test the stated hypothesis?	–
	Were statistical analyses conducted correctly?	Yes
	Do the data support the results?	Yes
	Were there any conflicts of interest or potential for them?	No

<p>“Explanation of ‘urban power’ and its effects on the development process of Tehran city” (Nezhadbahram &amp; Jalili, 2020)</p>	Is the study question relevant?	Yes – the study focuses on the role of urban power in bridging theory and practice in urban management.
	Does the study add something new?	No – although the study addresses the theory–practice gap, the proposals are general, and there is little empirical evidence or actionable insight provided.
	What type of research question is asked?	Exploratory
	Was the study design appropriate for the research question?	Yes
	Did the study address primary potential sources of bias?	No – some bias is evident toward anti-capitalist theoretical perspectives.
	Was the study conducted according to the original protocol (including research questions, hypotheses, methods, etc.)?	Partially – weaknesses include incomplete theoretical coverage of key perspectives, lack of explanation of the link between urban power and the theory–practice gap, and insufficient empirical evidence.
	Does the study test the stated hypothesis?	No – the study lacks a hypothesis.
	Were statistical analyses conducted correctly?	–
	Do the data support the results?	No – due to insufficient evidence, lack of a comprehensive theoretical model, and inability to generate reliable conclusions.
	Were there any conflicts of interest or potential for them?	No

The research title	Young & Solomon 10-step guide	
“Investigating the concept of urban ‘praxis’ in reducing the gap between theory and practice” (Noorian & Esmaeili, 2023)	Is the study question relevant?	No – the study lacks an explicit research question or hypothesis, and the concept of praxis is assumed a priori.
	Does the study add something new?	Yes – emphasizes the necessity of negotiation, community engagement, mediation, and facilitation skills as approaches to reduce the theory–practice gap in urban planning.
	What type of research question is asked?	–
	Was the study design appropriate for the research question?	Partially – although no explicit question was posed, the study focuses on bridging the theory–practice gap in urban planning education and provides relevant evidence.
	Did the study address primary potential sources of bias?	No – the theoretical framework is dominated by Foucault’s perspectives.
	Was the study conducted according to the original protocol (including research questions, hypotheses, methods, etc.)?	Partially – lacks comprehensive theoretical coverage of power in urban planning and management.
	Does the study test the stated hypothesis?	No
	Were statistical analyses conducted correctly?	–
	Do the data support the results?	Yes – findings are supported by official, accessible, and reliable data.
	Were there any conflicts of interest or potential for them?	No
“Evidence-based management: a bridge between management science and managerial practice” (Pazhohesh Jahromy, 2017)	Is the study question relevant?	Yes – the study raises the question in the abstract and introduction, focusing on bridging the gap between management theory and managerial practice.
	Does the study add something new?	Yes – by reviewing the literature on evidence-based management and analyzing the gap between scholars, theorists, and executive managers, it proposes strategies to bridge the theory–practice gap in both domains.
	What type of research question is asked?	Exploratory
	Was the study design appropriate for the research question?	Yes – the study uses a coherent framework based on the evidence hierarchy model, literature review, and situational analysis to structure the investigation.
	Did the study address primary potential sources of bias?	No, however, the study exhibits bias by attributing the lack of attention to evidence-based management mainly to managers’ limited awareness.
	Was the study conducted according to the original protocol (including research questions, hypotheses, methods, etc.)?	Yes – qualitative research standards were followed.
	Does the study test the stated hypothesis?	Yes – the primary assumption that limited managerial awareness causes underuse of evidence-based management was examined.
	Were statistical analyses conducted correctly?	–
Do the data support the results?	Yes	
Were there any conflicts of interest or potential for them?	No	

The research title Young & Solomon 10-step guide

<p>“The gap between knowledge and urban planning practice: findings from Tehran consulting engineering firms” (Nejati &amp; Nedae Tousi, 2025)</p>	Is the study question relevant?	Yes – the study examines how knowledge and practice are related in urban planning within consulting engineering firms, aiming to identify the gap between theory and practice.
	Does the study add something new?	Yes – by analyzing explicit and tacit knowledge in relation to the theory–practice gap, it provides new insights and diagnostic findings on urban planning and management in Tehran.
	What type of research question is asked?	Exploratory
	Was the study design appropriate for the research question?	Yes – using consulting firms as units of analysis and semi-structured interviews with thematic analysis provides a coherent study design.
	Did the study address primary potential sources of bias?	No
	Was the study conducted according to the original protocol (including research questions, hypotheses, methods, etc.)?	Yes – qualitative research standards were followed.
	Does the study test the stated hypothesis?	Yes – the research question was addressed.
	Were statistical analyses conducted correctly?	–
	Do the data support the results?	Yes – results are grounded in empirical fieldwork findings.
	Were there any conflicts of interest or potential for them?	No

<p>“The gap between theory and profession in contemporary urban design” (Samavati, 2020)</p>	Is the study question relevant?	Yes – the study explicitly addresses the gap between theory and practice in contemporary urban design.
	Does the study add something new?	Yes – through reviewing theoretical literature and theorists’ perspectives, the study provides a comprehensive summary of strategies to bridge the theory–practice gap. It also introduces evidence-based professional practice as a guiding framework.
	What type of research question is asked?	Research-oriented
	Was the study design appropriate for the research question?	Yes – a comparative analysis between theory and practice in urban design allows addressing the gap from the theorists’ perspective.
	Did the study address primary potential sources of bias?	No – the study focuses solely on theorists’ perspectives and neglects practitioner viewpoints.
	Was the study conducted according to the original protocol (including research questions, hypotheses, methods, etc.)?	Yes – research design was systematic, descriptive, and comprehensive regarding relevant theoretical frameworks.
	Does the study test the stated hypothesis?	Yes – the assumption of a gap between theory and practice is confirmed.
	Were statistical analyses conducted correctly?	–
	Do the data support the results?	Yes – the findings are justified based on theoretical evidence.
	Were there any conflicts of interest or potential for them?	No

The research title Young & Solomon 10-step guide

"Globalization and higher education: a gap between theory and action" (Javdani, 2009)	Is the study question relevant?	Yes – the study addresses the theory–practice gap in higher education, focusing on existing challenges in bridging theory and action.
	Does the study add something new?	No – due to an unrealistic perspective on higher education and its challenges, the results provide limited practical utility for bridging the theory–practice gap, especially in urban management.
	What type of research question is asked?	Fundamental/basic
	Was the study design appropriate for the research question?	Yes – the study relies on clearly defined content, examining the impact of globalization on higher education in light of the theory–practice gap.
	Did the study address primary potential sources of bias?	No – the study exhibits bias toward specific theories, e.g., anti-liberal perspectives.
	Was the study conducted according to the original protocol (including research questions, hypotheses, methods, etc.)?	Partially, the study is mainly descriptive and lacks in-depth analysis of the reciprocal effects of globalization and higher education regarding bridging the theory–practice gap.
	Does the study test the stated hypothesis?	–
	Were statistical analyses conducted correctly?	–
	Do the data support the results?	Yes – results are based on a review of existing studies.
	Were there any conflicts of interest or potential for them?	No

"The Relationship between theory and practice in profession-based education: a case study of urban design education" (Razaqi Asl, 2011)	Is the study question relevant?	Yes – the study addresses the theory–practice gap in professional education, specifically focusing on urban design education.
	Does the study add something new?	Yes – introduces profession-based education as a practical approach to bridging the theory–practice gap.
	What type of research question is asked?	Exploratory
	Was the study design appropriate for the research question?	Yes – the study is organized around two clearly formulated research questions.
	Did the study address primary potential sources of bias?	No – potential biases are not explicitly addressed.
	Was the study conducted according to the original protocol (including research questions, hypotheses, and methods)?	Yes – systematic review and analytical structure were applied consistently.
	Does the study test the stated hypothesis?	–
	Were statistical analyses conducted correctly?	–
	Do the data support the results?	Yes – findings are based on systematic review and analysis of the literature.
	Were there any conflicts of interest or potential for them?	No

<p>The collaborative planning approach as a remedy for the knowledge gap between planners and stakeholders' communicative knowledge (Aliabadi &amp; Asgari, 2015)</p>	<p>Is the study question relevant? Partially. Although no explicit research question is formulated, the study is centrally concerned with explaining the role of collaborative planning in addressing the knowledge gap between planners and stakeholders.</p> <p>Does the study add something new? No. The study relies heavily on collaborative planning as the sole and definitive solution to the theory–practice and knowledge gap in urban planning, without offering novel empirical insights or alternative conceptual contributions.</p> <p>What type of research question is asked? Not applicable. The study does not explicitly articulate a research question.</p> <p>Was the study design appropriate for the research question? No. The study does not engage with competing theories or alternative planning approaches, nor does it critically examine the limitations of collaborative planning. This lack of theoretical comparison weakens the analytical robustness of the study.</p> <p>Did the study address primary potential sources of bias? No. Although explicit bias is not acknowledged, the study demonstrates a strong normative commitment to collaborative planning, treating it as a universal remedy for planner–community disconnection.</p> <p>Was the study conducted according to the original protocol (including research questions, hypotheses, and methods)? No. Several core standards of scientific research—such as a clearly defined research problem, methodological transparency, and structured analytical procedures—are not adequately met.</p> <p>Does the study test the stated hypothesis? Not applicable. No hypothesis is explicitly stated.</p> <p>Were the statistical analyses conducted correctly? Yes. Where quantitative or analytical techniques are employed, they are applied correctly in technical terms.</p> <p>Do the data support the results? No. Due to weak analytical structure and limited methodological rigor, the findings are not sufficiently supported by the presented data.</p> <p>Were there any conflicts of interest or potential for them? No conflicts of interest were identified.</p>
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<p>Communicative planning as a proposed approach for neighborhood-scale urban planning (Sharifzadegan &amp; Shafiei, 2017)</p>	<p>Is the study question relevant? Yes. The study explicitly addresses the theory–practice gap by asking whether communicative planning can be operationalized within Iran's urban planning system as a practical remedy.</p> <p>Does the study add something new? No. The findings do not generate new insights into the underlying causes of the theory–practice gap, nor do they offer a critical assessment of communicative planning as an imported theoretical framework or propose context-sensitive, practice-based alternatives.</p> <p>What type of research question is asked? Exploratory.</p> <p>Was the study design appropriate for the research question? Yes. The research adopts a case study design grounded in fieldwork and follows accepted scientific standards, including a coherent research design, clear methodological procedures, and the presentation of empirical evidence.</p> <p>Did the study address major potential sources of bias? No. The study demonstrates a clear theoretical bias in favour of communicative planning and does not critically reflect on its underlying assumptions.</p> <p>Was the study conducted according to the original protocol (including research questions, hypotheses, and methods)? Yes. The standards of analytical–descriptive research are largely observed.</p> <p>Does the study test the stated hypothesis? Not applicable. No explicit hypothesis is stated.</p> <p>Were the statistical analyses conducted correctly? Yes. The statistical analyses are methodologically sound.</p> <p>Do the data support the results? Yes. The empirical data adequately support the results.</p> <p>Were there any conflicts of interest or potential for them? No conflicts of interest were identified.</p>
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The research title	Young & Solomon 10-step guide
Explaining the role of power–knowledge in spatial planning with an emphasis on disciplinary power and biopower (Nejati et al., 2021)	<p>Is the study question relevant? No. While the study draws on the concepts of disciplinary power and biopower, it does not explicitly frame its inquiry around the theory–practice gap. Instead, it seeks to trace the roots of this gap indirectly through a power–knowledge lens.</p> <p>Does the study add something new? Yes. The study offers an argument-driven contribution by concluding that planners must recognize power–knowledge relations and incorporate informal and practice-based mechanisms into urban planning and management processes.</p> <p>What type of research question is asked? Basic (theoretical) research.</p> <p>Was the study design appropriate for the research question? Yes. The study follows the structure of a qualitative research design grounded in scientific standards, including an appropriate research framework, rigorous methodology, and the presentation of relevant evidence and findings.</p> <p>Did the study address major potential sources of bias? No. The study demonstrates a clear theoretical bias toward Foucauldian perspectives on power in planning, without critically engaging with the theoretical challenges or limitations of this viewpoint.</p> <p>Was the study conducted according to the original protocol (including research questions, hypotheses, and methods)? Yes. The standards of qualitative research are largely observed.</p> <p>Does the study test the stated hypothesis? Not applicable. No explicit hypothesis is stated.</p> <p>Were the statistical analyses conducted correctly? Yes. Where applicable, the analytical procedures are methodologically sound.</p> <p>Do the data support the results? Yes. The findings are adequately supported by the empirical and analytical evidence presented.</p> <p>Were there any conflicts of interest or potential for them? No conflicts of interest were identified.</p>

**Table 2. Paradigmatic–content evaluation of previous studies based on the Alvesson and Sandberg framework**

Previous research	Alvesson & Sandberg’s proposed evaluation framework
A critical review of the theory–practice gap within the modern positivist paradigm in management and organization (Abdollahi & Mohammadi, 2017)	<p>Identification of the scope of the literature (text configuration and key findings): The scope of the literature has been addressed to a considerable extent, and the core assumptions of positivism in bridging the theory–practice gap have been critically challenged. This critical engagement constitutes one of the main strengths of the study, as it opens new horizons for identifying alternative solutions to reduce the gap between theory and practice.</p> <p>Identification and explication of core assumptions: The central assumption of positivism—privileging pure observation and empirical experience as the primary criteria for knowledge production—has been explicitly identified. At the same time, this assumption is critically questioned, as the study highlights the limitations of observation and experience when detached from complementary dimensions such as subjective values and cultural judgments.</p> <p>Evaluation and problematization of assumptions: A critical evaluation of positivist assumptions is conducted by emphasizing the inseparability of social realities from theory, the influence of values in the research process, and the necessity of phenomenological and critical approaches for narrowing the theory–practice gap. This explicit critique of one of the most dominant paradigms of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is a major contribution, as it provides a foundation for future research aimed at developing more practice-oriented solutions through critical theoretical engagement.</p> <p>Inter-coder agreement: 90%</p>
Sustainable development: from policymaking to practice (Rezaei et al., 2023)	<p>Identification of the scope of the literature: The literature review is comprehensive and well-structured. Given the study’s reliance on reliable statistical data, identification of key stakeholders, and application of validated reliability and validity tests, the findings can be considered robust and trustworthy.</p> <p>Identification and explication of core assumptions: Public policy-making is adopted as the main theoretical framework. Relevant approaches and theories are reviewed, and a critical synthesis is provided through the formulation of a contingency-based policy gap model.</p> <p>Evaluation and problematization of assumptions: Despite the detailed review of public policy approaches and the development of an adapted conceptual model, the underlying assumptions are largely taken for granted and not critically interrogated. However, this limitation does not substantially undermine the study’s critical orientation or its theoretical contribution.</p> <p>Inter-coder agreement: 90%</p>

Previous research	Alvesson & Sandberg's proposed evaluation framework
<p>Pathology of research processes in Tehran municipality (Jalili Sadrabad &amp; Sanjideh, 2022)</p>	<p>Identification of the scope of the literature: The main institutional structures are identified, and the definition and implementation of research processes based on Tehran municipality's research regulations are examined and critiqued. Due to methodological rigor and reliance on documented field data and statistical sources, the study presents reliable findings.</p> <p>Identification and explication of core assumptions: Although experiences from several European and Asian municipalities are reviewed, the underlying assumptions of their theoretical frameworks are neither examined nor critiqued. The study also lacks a clear foundational theoretical framework.</p> <p>Evaluation and problematization of assumptions: owing to the absence of a guiding theoretical framework—or even a critical framework adapted to Tehran's context—core assumptions are treated as self-evident and remain unchallenged.</p> <p>Inter-coder agreement: 95%</p>
<p>Pathology of the role of research and its application in urban management: Tehran case study (Alvani et al., 2018)</p>	<p>Identification of the scope of the literature: The scope is addressed relatively comprehensively. By identifying various decision-making loops within the Tehran municipality's research processes, the study provides a fairly holistic picture of the background literature. The use of transparent statistical data and a straightforward methodological process enhances the credibility of the findings.</p> <p>Identification and explication of core assumptions: The study adopts evidence-based policymaking—specifically, the research supply–demand model—as its core assumption. Given the conceptual clarification of this approach and its relevance to the theory–practice gap in Tehran's urban management, this dimension is adequately addressed.</p> <p>Evaluation and problematization of assumptions: Although the assumptions of evidence-based policymaking are clearly articulated, they are treated as unquestioned foundations. The study assumes that this approach can reliably bridge theory and practice. Nevertheless, due to its data-driven and evidence-oriented nature, the findings remain largely credible.</p> <p>Inter-coder agreement: 95%</p>
<p>How can Iranian grassroots institutions reform urban planning? A case study of the Shoush neighborhood (Samanpour, 2022)</p>	<p>Identification of the scope of the literature: Drawing on structuration theory (Anthony Giddens), the study revisits the theory–practice gap while critically challenging rationalist planning models such as comprehensive plans. Empirical evidence is used to substantiate the role of grassroots institutions in framing urban regeneration problems.</p> <p>Identification and explication of core assumptions: The dominant rationalist assumptions in Western urban planning theories are contrasted with Giddens' emphasis on situated practice and local experience. The critical role of informal and local institutions in identifying neighborhood-level problems is highlighted.</p> <p>Evaluation and problematization of assumptions: No new assumptions are proposed; instead, Giddens' structuration theory is employed to explain the influence of tacit and experiential knowledge on formal knowledge. This theoretical alignment may weaken the study's validity, as local experience is subsumed under a single theoretical lens, despite the existence of alternative theories emphasizing local knowledge.</p> <p>Inter-coder agreement: 95%</p>
<p>Conceptualizing 'urban power' and its effects on Tehran's urban development (Nejad Bahram &amp; Jalili, 2020)</p>	<p>Identification of the scope of the literature: The literature review lacks sufficient depth and coherence. Excessive reliance on specific power theories and insufficient theoretical integration weaken the study's structure and its contribution to addressing the theory–practice gap.</p> <p>Identification and explication of core assumptions: Urban power theories are adopted with assumptions centered on political conspiracy and revolutionary citizen action. These assumptions fail to produce concrete insights applicable to Tehran's urban management context.</p> <p>Evaluation and problematization of assumptions: No critical evaluation of classical power theories (e.g., Russell, Weber, Foucault) is conducted. The unconditional acceptance of Foucauldian perspectives—rooted in socio-political contexts distinct from Iran—limits the study's relevance to Tehran's urban realities.</p> <p>Inter-coder agreement: 85%</p>

Urban praxis and the reduction of the theory–practice gap (Nourian & Esmaili, 2023)	<p>Identification of the scope of the literature: The literature review is narrowly focused on Foucauldian and Bourdieusian power frameworks, neglecting context-sensitive theories that better reflect Tehran's urban governance dynamics.</p> <p>Identification and explication of core assumptions: The assumption that influential groups exercise power through formal and informal political mechanisms is adopted without contextual filtering or local adaptation.</p> <p>Evaluation and problematization of assumptions: Marxist-rooted assumptions embedded in Foucauldian and Bourdieusian theories remain unchallenged, particularly regarding the primacy of political dimensions over economic and cultural factors in contemporary urban power relations.</p> <p>Inter-coder agreement: 85%</p>
Jahromi (2017) Evidence-based management: bridging the gap between management science and managerial practice	<p>Identification of the scope of the literature (text configuration and key findings): Due to the coherence and maturity of the evidence-based management literature, the study demonstrates strong thematic mastery and methodological structure. A well-articulated intellectual history of evidence-based management is presented, tracing its theoretical and historical evolution and justifying its role as a bridge between theory and practice. By proposing alternative applications of evidence-based management across different research domains, the study enhances the credibility and robustness of its conclusions within the existing literature.</p> <p>Identification and explication of core assumptions: Although the study is theoretically grounded in the core assumptions and components of evidence-based management, it exhibits analytical bias in diagnosing the theory–practice gap. The analysis disproportionately attributes the gap to managers' lack of awareness and routine-oriented behavior, while overlooking other influential variables. Notably, the deficiencies of management theories themselves—particularly their limited effectiveness in public-sector contexts and their misalignment with Iran's political, economic, and legal structures—are insufficiently addressed. This imbalance weakens the study's capacity to offer context-sensitive and practically grounded conclusions.</p> <p>Evaluation and problematization of assumptions: While the study convincingly identifies weaknesses within executive management systems by relying on the general assumptions of evidence-based management, it encounters limitations when addressing Iran's specific institutional context. The argument that scientific evidence enhances managerial success overlooks the structural deficiencies affecting the production and applicability of such evidence in Iran. The critical question of why managers tend to disregard available research evidence remains unexamined, as the issue is reduced mainly to managerial awareness alone.</p> <p>Inter-coder agreement: 90%</p>
The gap between knowledge and practice in urban planning: evidence from consulting firms in Tehran (Nejati & Nedaei Tousi, 2025)	<p>Identification of the scope of the literature: By foregrounding the distinction between tacit and explicit knowledge and examining their relationship to the global theory–practice gap in urban planning, alongside a case study of Iranian planning and architectural consulting firms, the study achieves a well-defined scope. The field-based research design strengthens both the conceptual configuration and the reliability of the findings.</p> <p>Identification and explication of core assumptions: Several widely recognized assumptions are identified and examined, including structural weaknesses in formal institutions, deficiencies in professional capacity within consulting firms, and the marginalization of experiential knowledge in professional and executive routines.</p> <p>Evaluation and problematization of assumptions: Despite identifying key factors contributing to the intensification of the theory–practice gap—such as the exclusion of experiential knowledge from formal policies—the study does not sufficiently engage with deeper, more foundational issues. These include the philosophical roots of the planning theory–practice divide in Tehran, the passive role of academia in developing context-sensitive urban theories, and the cognitive distance between explicit academic knowledge and the needs of practice. As a result, the study falls short of critically challenging the dominant assumptions underlying prevailing planning paradigms.</p> <p>Inter-coder agreement: 95%</p>

The gap between theory and professional practice in contemporary urban design (Samavati, 2020)

Identification of the scope of the literature:  
Through a review of theories addressing the knowledge–practice divide in urban design, the study provides an adequate thematic scope. The findings, derived from theoretical proposals and recommendations by prominent scholars, demonstrate acceptable internal validity. However, the exclusive reliance on theorists' perspectives—combined with the absence of practitioners' and empiricists' viewpoints and limited attention to Iran's contextual conditions—reduces the practical effectiveness of the proposed solutions.

Identification and explication of core assumptions:  
The study reviews four major theoretical perspectives on the relationship between urban design theory and practice, expressing optimism that the application of theoretical research findings in professional contexts can bridge the gap. Nevertheless, although one theorist (Marshall, 2012) argues that theory must be scrutinized and validated by practitioners, this insight is only briefly acknowledged and not analytically developed.

Evaluation and problematization of assumptions:  
The assumptions embedded in the reviewed theories are broadly accepted without a systematic assessment of their actual capacity to reduce the theory–practice gap. This limitation, coupled with the neglect of experiential critiques of theory from practitioners' perspectives, undermines the study's contribution to a meaningful roadmap for bridging the gap in urban design.

Inter-coder agreement: 95%

Globalization and higher education: the disjunction between theory and action (Javdani, 2009)

Identification of the scope of the literature:  
Although the literature is reviewed, the study exhibits a strong theoretical bias. Globalization is framed primarily as an instrument of domination, and international institutions (e.g., the World Bank and WTO) are portrayed as key drivers of commodification in higher education. Consequently, the study attributes the theory–practice gap mainly to knowledge commodification in developed countries, while asserting that such a gap is negligible in developing contexts like Iran.

Identification and explication of core assumptions:  
The central assumption is that higher education systems in developing countries are largely immune to the theory–practice gap, as the root causes—commercialization and market-driven knowledge production—are presumed absent.

Evaluation and problematization of assumptions:  
By uncritically adopting anti-globalization arguments and overlooking empirical realities of Iran's higher education system—including the pronounced disconnect between academic knowledge and practice—the study fails to open new analytical horizons for addressing the gap. Ironically, higher education could represent a critical starting point for bridging theory and practice, yet this opportunity remains unexplored.

Inter-coder agreement: 90%

The relationship between theory and practice in profession-based education: a case study of urban design knowledge (Razaghi asl, 2011)

Identification of the scope of the literature:  
Focusing on work-based learning as a practical solution to the theory–practice gap and grounding the discussion in relevant theoretical debates, the study clearly defines its scope and achieves a coherent conceptual configuration. Key findings are articulated around reforming urban planning education to address the gap directly.

Identification and explication of core assumptions:  
By adopting a pragmatist view of theory-building rooted in practice and experience, the study enhances its credibility in addressing the theory–practice divide. It argues that theory should emerge from observation, dialogue, and logical inference rather than abstract philosophical speculation.

Evaluation and problematization of assumptions:  
Despite emphasizing practical solutions, the study accepts the assumptions of work-based education without critically examining the structural barriers to its implementation in Iran's higher education system. These include the scarcity of localized urban theories, limited recognition of experiential knowledge, and institutional resistance to integrating practice-based learning into formal curricula.

Inter-coder agreement: 95%

Collaborative planning as a remedy for the knowledge gap between planners and stakeholder groups (Aliabadi & Asgari, 2015)

Identification of the scope of the literature:  
The scope is narrowly confined to a single theory—collaborative planning—which is presented as the sole solution to the theory–practice gap in urban planning. The study's configuration is weak, and its methodology remains primarily descriptive and one-dimensional.

Identification and explication of core assumptions:  
Collaborative planning and all its underlying assumptions are fully endorsed and positioned as the primary mechanism for bridging the planning theory–practice divide.

Evaluation and problematization of assumptions:  
The study assumes that adherence to communication and collaboration principles is sufficient to resolve conflicts between planners, communities, and urban managers, without engaging with the operational complexities of these principles. Given that collaborative planning emerged within Western socio-political contexts, its uncritical application to Eastern settings entails distinct contextual challenges that remain unaddressed.

Inter-coder agreement: 95%

Previous research	Alvesson & Sandberg's proposed evaluation framework
<p>Communicative planning as a proposed approach for neighborhood-scale urban planning (Sharifzadegan &amp; Shafiei, 2017)</p>	<p>Identification of the scope of the literature: By reviewing global urban planning perspectives on development challenges and theory–practice gaps, the study attempts to define an appropriate scope. The case-study methodology and reliance on local empirical evidence result in a coherent research configuration.</p> <p>Identification and explication of core assumptions: The principles and assumptions of communicative planning are introduced, and small spatial units—such as neighborhoods—are proposed as suitable scales for implementation.</p> <p>Evaluation and problematization of assumptions: Although feasibility assessment is stated as a key objective, communicative planning assumptions are accepted without critical scrutiny or empirical validation through comparative experiences. In the final synthesis, the approach is unconditionally endorsed as an effective solution for bridging the theory–practice gap, particularly in citizen participation.</p> <p>Inter-coder agreement: 90%</p>
<p>Explaining the role of power–knowledge in spatial planning: disciplinary power and biopower (Nejati et al., 2021)</p>	<p>Identification of the scope of the literature: The theoretical scope is adequately identified; however, its extension to practical urban planning and management contexts is problematic. Treating power–knowledge through a strictly Foucauldian lens, as the dominant actor in spatial planning, constrains the study's analytical reach.</p> <p>Identification and explication of core assumptions: The Foucauldian power–knowledge framework is adopted, assuming that spatial production is shaped not only by formal regulations but also by disciplinary discourses, institutions, permanent states of exception, and biopower.</p> <p>Evaluation and problematization of assumptions: Despite its conceptual appeal, the study does not critically interrogate the limitations of Foucauldian assumptions—particularly their anti-market orientation and limited engagement with urban economic realities. The uncritical reliance on power–knowledge as a universally effective framework constitutes the study's primary theoretical weakness in addressing the theory–practice gap.</p> <p>Inter-coder agreement: 95%</p>

A careful examination of the results of the critical assessment reveals several important realities. First, prior studies have not only failed to rigorously challenge the theoretical assumptions of different planning paradigms through robust methodological frameworks, but have also—intentionally or unintentionally—reinforced certain flawed assumptions. For instance, studies addressing the theory–practice gap in planning from an educational perspective, including Nourian & Esmaili (2023), Samavati (2020), and Rezaqi Asli (2011), have focused exclusively on the discipline of urban planning. This narrow focus implicitly suggests that the theory–practice gap in urban planning and management in Tehran could be resolved mainly through reforms in higher education, such as strengthening communication skills, negotiation and mediation techniques, and enhancing graduates' awareness of the political dimensions and power relations shaping the city (Najad Bahram & Jalili, 2020), among other measures.

Such an assumption suffers from a fundamental methodological limitation. Within the same higher education system, it would have been necessary to critically examine whether, alongside so-called soft skills, sufficient attention is given to the historical and

philosophical underpinnings of imported planning theories, as well as to the ways in which these theories are adapted—or fail to be adapted—to the economic, social, and environmental contexts of Iranian cities. Equally important is the need to recognize and prioritize the mechanisms through which indigenous urban development theories can be generated, grounded in local experience and accumulated lived knowledge. Moreover, a critical question remains unanswered: what if the proposed recommendations yield significantly weaker outcomes in practice and themselves contribute to the formation of yet another dysfunctional loop within the urban planning and management system—one that further exacerbates the theory–practice gap? What guarantees exist that the assumptions accepted as foundational premises of hypotheses in these studies are free from theoretical or philosophical shortcomings? No clear answer is provided. The problems associated with such assumptions can be articulated through two key issues:

The first issue concerns the reduction of the theory–practice gap in urban planning and management through reforms within the urban planning education system. Such a reductionist framing narrows the problem of bridging the theory–practice divide in

urban planning and management to purely educational concerns. At the same time, the gap itself encompasses far broader and more complex dimensions, including political contexts, socio-cultural conditions, levels of economic development, and related structural factors. By confining the problem to education alone, the multifaceted and systemic nature of the theory–practice gap is obscured.

The second issue relates to the planner-centric conceptualization of urban planning—an approach with historical roots that is likely to exert even more profound adverse effects on efforts to bridge the theory–practice gap in Iran’s urban management system, particularly in Tehran. This perspective constrains the domain of urban planning and management to the discipline of urban planning or urban design, even though numerous other fields—such as urban sociology, urban law, urban economics, urban geography, psychology, and urban management—play significant roles in both the emergence and remediation of the theory–practice gap. Consequently, reforming and enhancing higher education with the aim of aligning academic perspectives more closely with on-the-ground realities, and thereby enabling a more accurate and realistic problem framing in urban management, should be a shared concern across all these disciplines. In other words, critical and reform-oriented theories that are advanced on the premise that rationalist approaches and instrumental rationality are incapable of identifying genuine local needs or adequately accounting for socio-cultural diversity risk falling into a form of theoretical rigidity when they reduce the planning problem to a single actor—the urban planner—or, at best, a limited set of actors. By prioritizing localized sentiments, individual experiences, and narrowly defined problems while neglecting market realities, the dynamic urban economy, citizen participation and partnership in the value added by urban development, the economic power of diverse actors—including the private sector—and the dynamics of capital flows within the city, such approaches ultimately undermine the very foundations and processes of effective urban planning and, by extension, sound urban management. As a result, rather than contributing to the remediation of the theory–practice gap in Tehran’s urban management, they risk deepening this divide by failing to engage with its underlying drivers and structural elements. Another salient reality is the strong commitment of some prior studies, including

Sharifzadegan & Shafiei, 2017; Aliabadi & Asgari, 2014, to a particular theoretical framework—most notably collaborative or communicative planning—as the primary means of resolving the theory–practice divide in urban development planning and management. In other words, by emphasizing the participatory and locally grounded theoretical foundations of these approaches, and by recognizing citizen participation in the preparation of urban development plans as a core principle, such studies argue that fundamental change can be achieved through the active involvement of key actors and stakeholders. On this basis, these approaches are presented as the singular or dominant solution for bridging the gap between theory and practice.

This perspective, however, suffers from two significant theoretical and methodological shortcomings. First, from a theoretical standpoint, none of the constituent elements of the adopted theories—including their intellectual and empirical origins, underlying assumptions, and core principles—have been subjected to critical evaluation in terms of their compatibility with the specific socio-political, economic, and institutional contexts of Iran, and Tehran in particular. Instead, these theories have been mainly accepted because they promote active citizen participation or claim the capacity to generate social and transformative change, without a rigorous contextual interrogation.

Second, from a practical perspective, neither previous applications nor the studies themselves have systematically examined the post-implementation feedback of the recommended approaches in real-world settings. Put differently, these studies do not engage with empirical evidence regarding the outcomes of applying the assumptions and processes associated with the proposed approaches in actual cases. Such an examination could have provided a robust theoretical and methodological foundation for endorsing these approaches, as the core claims of pragmatism and extensive actor and citizen engagement could have been empirically tested and validated in the contexts where these approaches have been implemented. Moreover, the issue of policy reform within urban management processes as a means of bridging the theory–practice gap has been largely neglected in the related literature. However, some studies have emphasized the incorporation of lived experience and the indigenous knowledge of NGOs and community-based organizations into the process of urban policy reform—particularly in efforts

to address the theory–practice gap and to improve urban management policies in areas such as deteriorated urban fabrics and the social challenges of declining neighborhoods (e.g., Samanpour, 2022)—such contributions remain limited in scope.

More broadly, policy reform in Tehran’s urban management system, which on the one hand suffers from the absence of integrated urban governance and, on the other hand, faces an increasingly widening theory–practice gap, requires a more rigorous theoretical and conceptual articulation. Specifically, there is a need to develop a coherent intellectual framework for designing policy entrepreneurship aimed at optimizing existing urban management policies with the explicit objective of repairing the theory–practice divide.

## 5. Epistemological inferences

The findings of the present study indicate that the neglect of the intellectual sources and theoretical lineages of imported planning paradigms constitutes one of the most serious shortcomings of the reviewed studies. In other words, much of the research concerned with the theory–practice gap in urban management overlooks the formative contexts of urban development and management paradigms, instead taking their theoretical assumptions for granted while searching for solutions to bridge the theory–practice divide. In many cases—most notably with respect to comprehensive urban planning theories—it is precisely these schools of thought that suffer from fundamental epistemological and methodological deficiencies. Accepting their underlying assumptions uncritically, therefore, amounts to pursuing an inherently flawed research trajectory from the outset. Similarly, the unquestioned acceptance of the assumptions embedded in many planning perspectives, particularly emerging urban planning models, can be regarded as one of the most significant epistemological weaknesses of the examined studies.

Another epistemological shortcoming emerges in the analysis and contextual alignment of intellectual paradigms in urban planning and management. For example, in some studies (e.g., Sharifzadegan & Shafiei, 2014), the theoretical section asserts that “communicative planning, by providing appropriate theoretical conditions, supports democratic and participatory decision-making practices that can simultaneously fulfill development objectives. By fostering interaction among all stakeholder groups and

operating at a small scale (the urban neighborhood), this approach is particularly suitable for developing countries—where civil and political freedoms are more limited—allowing it to generate not only urban development outcomes but also social and political benefits.”

In the empirical section of the same study, based on the case of the Farahzad neighborhood in Tehran, it is concluded that “the level of interaction among neighbors, relatives, and local residents is moderate. However, social cohesion among members of the same ethnic group is considerably stronger. In other words, as might be expected, ethnic affiliation outweighs neighborhood attachment, yet neighborhood belonging appears sufficient to serve as a foundation for communicative planning.

While the theoretical section draws extensively on Western planning theorists to convey the normative desirability of communicative planning, it fails to engage with the historical trajectory of urban development, participation, and urban management in Tehran—despite the city’s relatively rich 120-year history of municipal governance. More critically, it neglects to compare this trajectory with the historical evolution of participation and urban development in Europe, where communicative planning theory itself was produced. On the one hand, the absence of such historical and comparative grounding, and on the other hand, the reliance on speculative propositions—such as assumptions regarding the role of neighborhood attachment in enabling the applicability of communicative planning as an imported theory—constitute clear manifestations of paradigmatic misalignment and insufficient engagement with the epistemic origins of imported theories and their modes of application.

Although certain overlaps may exist at the level of general frameworks and indicators—such as community participation or the incorporation of residents’ perspectives in neighborhood problem framing—from the standpoint of the theory–practice gap, the more fundamental issue lies in the epistemological, ontological, and methodological conditions under which theories are produced, applied, and validated. These conditions ultimately determine whether a theory can be meaningfully translated into practice and successfully implemented in specific urban contexts.

Some studies also suffer from a form of contextual epistemological fallacy. Specifically, by presupposing that capitalism and instrumental rationality constitute

the primary sources of Iran's persistent structural problems and the severe theory–practice gap in urban management, and by relying on a social constructivist epistemology and Foucauldian discourse analysis—alongside the uncritical acceptance of the thesis of capitalism's transition from imperialism to empire—these studies conclude that spatial planners, in addition to the conventional planning approaches taught in academic settings, must engage with power–knowledge dynamics. This engagement, it is argued, would enable planners to operate more effectively not only within the formal spatial planning system but also within informal arenas of action. Subsequently, by drawing on practical rationality or phronesis in processes of interaction and negotiation with power, planners are encouraged to exert maximum effort toward constructing an alternative, human-centered, and development-oriented discourse.

The most significant epistemological shortcomings of such studies lie in their reliance on conspiracy-oriented theoretical narratives—framed through notions of global imperialism and capitalist empire—the elevation of the planner as a representative of an explicitly anti-capitalist ideology rather than as an actor embedded within local socio-spatial realities, and the marginalization of historical trajectories as well as economic, social, political, and cultural contexts of planning environments. Ultimately, these limitations result in an ontological deviation from addressing the theory–practice gap itself, reframing it instead as a struggle over urban power and class conflict, thereby diverting attention from the substantive conditions required to bridge theory and practice in urban management meaningfully. Alongside these considerations, as argued by Alvesson and Sandberg, one of the most significant contributions a research study can make lies in challenging the assumptions and cognitive frames underpinning an existing paradigm or dominant perspective through a problematization approach. Rather than relying on ready-made questions, problematization—combined with a dialectical engagement with competing viewpoints—seeks to question taken-for-granted assumptions and generate genuinely new research questions. This critical capacity, however, was notably absent in the studies reviewed in the present analysis.

## 6. Discussion and conclusion

The theory–practice gap in urban management and planning has long been a persistent concern for both scholars and theorists in the field of urban planning

and management, on the one hand, and policymakers and local and urban managers, on the other—particularly in Western contexts. Extensive scholarly debates have emerged around the very ontological and epistemological foundations of this gap. However, only a marginal fraction of these debates has found its way into the academic literature and scholarly discussions within Iran. Much like an iceberg, Iranian students, researchers, and urban managers have been exposed primarily to its visible tip, while the deeper layers remain submerged and largely unexplored.

This study sought to open a window into these deeper layers—those embedded within the ocean of urban meta-problems and mega-challenges characterizing cities such as Tehran. To this end, a hybrid critical evaluative methodology was adopted. Fifteen relevant studies were first systematically assessed, followed by a critical discussion of the key gaps identified in relation to processes aimed at repairing the theory–practice divide in Tehran's urban management and planning system. The findings indicate that the majority of the selected prior studies (with a few exceptions, such as Abdollahi and Mohammadi, 2017) failed to critically interrogate the theoretical assumptions of dominant and mainstream planning paradigms. Instead, these assumptions were treated mainly as self-evident and unquestioned, forming the basis for subsequent analyses and evaluations. In some cases (e.g., Sharifzadegan and Shafiei, 2017; Aliabadi & Asgari, 2015), a particular approach—namely collaborative/communicative planning—was recommended as a tool for bridging the theory–practice gap without a critical examination of its intellectual origins, its functional and dysfunctional dimensions within its original Western context, or its adaptability based on empirical feedback from prior applications in different socio-institutional settings.

Moreover, several studies (such as Nejati et al., 2021) adopted a prescriptive theoretical stance, positioning the power–knowledge framework as an uncontested and dominant actor within urban management and planning, viewed primarily through the lens of a single theorist (Foucault). These studies argue that planners, by recognizing the conditions of the so-called capitalist “empire” and the configuration of power relations and urban actors, can steer planning outcomes toward collective interests. However, this perspective has been subject to substantial criticism within its original Western context. More recent theoretical developments acknowledge the role of markets in mediating supply and demand within urban

governance systems and explicitly recognize urban market actors—such as those involved in land, goods, and service markets—as legitimate stakeholders and agents within urban management and planning processes. Based on the foregoing analysis, it can be concluded that most previous studies concerned with the theory–practice gap in urban planning and management—particularly in the context of Tehran—have been largely unsuccessful in opening new horizons for advancing toward a meaningful resolution of this longstanding debate. Consequently, their findings have offered limited practical utility in contributing to the repair of the theory–practice divide in urban management and planning. Another important finding of this study is that some prior research (e.g., Nourian and Esmaili, 2023) has reduced the theory–practice gap in urban issues primarily to the domain of education, locating the solution in the enhancement of specific technical or professional skills among planning students. From this

perspective, it can be argued that, at best, urban planning education constitutes only a small component of the broader and more complex meta-problem of the theory–practice gap in Iran’s urban governance system.

Finally, the findings reveal that several studies explicitly focused on the theory–practice gap in urban management (e.g., Samanpour, 2022; Nejad Bahram & Jalili, 2020) suffer from a lack of theoretical comprehensiveness, as they rely predominantly on a single theoretical stream while neglecting competing schools of thought. Such theoretically narrow approaches, while normatively motivated, are unlikely to offer epistemologically or methodologically robust pathways for addressing the theory–practice gap. Figure 4 presents a simplified conceptual model developed in this study for reframing the problem with a clear orientation toward repairing the theory–practice divide in Tehran’s urban management system.

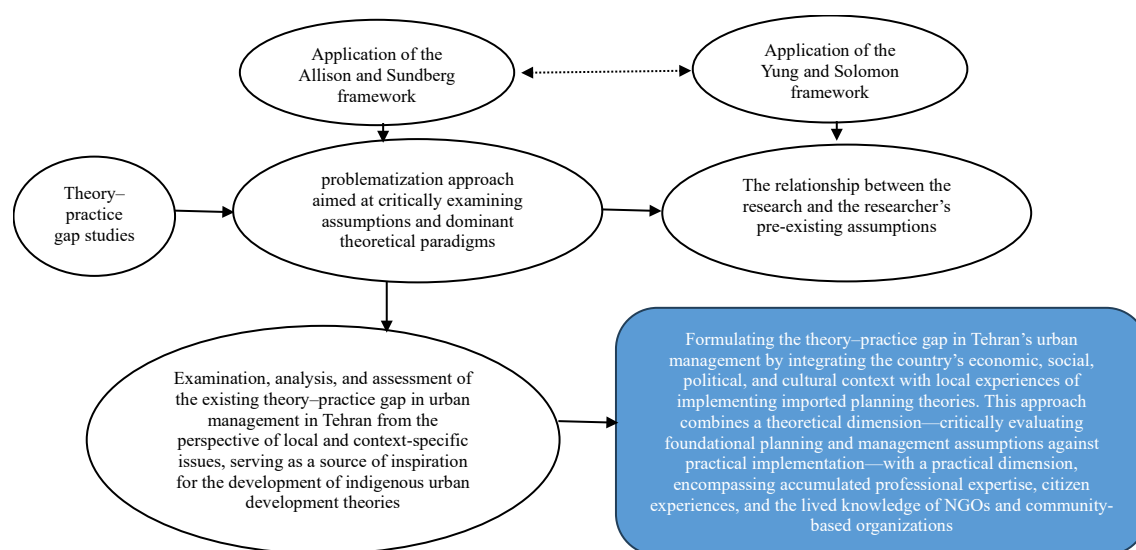


Figure 4. Simplified conceptual model for reframing the issue of the theory-practice gap in Tehran’s urban management

## 7. Translating findings into practice

This section presents the study’s recommendations in two parts:

- (a) recommendations for the academic community (future research agenda) and
- (b) recommendations for the target community (a policy package for urban managers).

### (a) Recommendations for the academic community (future research agenda)

Given that the theory–practice gap represents one of the most significant sources of inefficiency in urban

management practice, as well as the growing disconnect between urban planning theories and the genuine concerns of urban governance in Iran—and particularly in Tehran—the expansion of theoretical and conceptual research in this field is imperative. Such efforts should be supported not only by universities but also by research institutions embedded within public organizations such as the Tehran municipality and other governmental bodies. Moreover, considering that one of the most critical yet underexplored foundations for repairing the theory–

practice gap in Tehran's urban management—namely empiricism, practice-based knowledge, and the theorization of lived managerial experience within a local urban development framework—has received minimal scholarly attention, it is recommended that this theme be elevated to a priority research agenda. Financial support mechanisms and institutional incentives could facilitate its integration into the research and development (R&D) programs of public-sector organizations. A further significant theoretical gap deserving scholarly attention concerns the development of endogenous and context-sensitive models of urban development in Iran. While many influential Western planning theories emerged from localized experiences and context-specific problem-solving, in Iran, these theories have been mainly imported and applied with limited adaptation to local socio-political, economic, and cultural conditions. In this regard, addressing the theory–practice gap by focusing on the process of theory formation itself—rather than the direct translation and transplantation of existing theories—constitutes a crucial avenue for foundational research.

#### (b) recommendations for the target community (policy package for urban managers)

To bridge the theory–practice gap, it is recommended that the Tehran municipality establish a critical, knowledge-oriented institution in collaboration with universities, tasked with producing context-sensitive knowledge and systematically capturing and transferring the tacit knowledge of urban managers and practitioners. Additionally, the design and institutionalization of citizen-centered participatory mechanisms in the formulation of Tehran's large-scale urban projects—emphasizing the incorporation of citizens' lived experiences into intervention policies—can play a significant role in narrowing the gap. This should be complemented by the enhancement of planners' and executive managers' soft skills, such as negotiation, mediation, development facilitation, and stakeholder conflict management, through formal technical and training guidelines. Furthermore, as evidenced in several studies (e.g., Samanpour, 2022), the integration of civil society organizations and informal experiences into formal policies and programs has proven effective in many cases. These organizations possess rich reservoirs of lived experience that are often overlooked or inadequately understood within formal policy frameworks.

## 8. Methodological limitations and directions for future research

Like all empirical studies, this research faced several limitations. The primary limitation lies in its reliance on published written texts, which precluded the assessment of tacit knowledge and informal decision-making processes—factors that may themselves constitute significant sources of the theory–practice gap. Additionally, potential selection and interpretation bias in the process of article review represents another notable limitation. A further limitation stems from the relative unfamiliarity of critical evaluative methodologies within the under-researched field of the theory–practice gap in Iran's urban management literature. Finally, constraints related to the number and quality of existing studies, coupled with the absence of a well-developed body of critical evaluation literature, restricted the depth and scope of analysis. Accordingly, a key recommendation for future research is the methodological advancement of critical evaluation approaches, particularly through the refinement and broader application of the combined evaluative framework employed in this study. It is suggested that this hybrid methodology be tested across other domains of urban management literature to assess its robustness and establish its credibility as a reliable tool for critical review research. Despite these limitations, the methodological, epistemological, and ontological diagnostics, along with the paradigm-level critiques advanced in this article, remain valid. First, the analysis is grounded in peer-reviewed studies published in reputable academic journals. While tacit knowledge and informal processes aimed at repairing the theory–practice gap may exist in Tehran's urban management context, their lack of documentation and scholarly publication renders them unsuitable as analytical units and does not undermine the findings of this study.

Second, although potential bias in study selection and critique cannot be eliminated, the application of the integrated critical evaluation framework proposed by Young and Solomon, and Alvesson and Sandberg, substantially mitigated this risk by obligating the author to adhere strictly to predefined evaluative questions and procedures. Finally, while the scarcity of subject-specific literature—particularly within the realm of critical evaluation—constituted a limitation, this study sought to compensate by assembling and systematically documenting all relevant and credible

research aligned with its objectives, thereby laying a foundation for future methodological and epistemological development in this field. In conclusion, the following question may serve as a productive starting point for future research: in the absence of foundational, locally grounded theories of urban planning and management, is it meaningful to frame the theory–practice gap as a central concern? Put differently, when imported planning and management theories lack substantive congruence with Tehran’s local conditions, can a genuine discussion of their disjunction from urban management practice be sustained? A subsequent question, conditional

upon addressing the first, is how, and through what processes, local lived experiences, accumulated professional knowledge, and practice-oriented urban governance can be systematically theorized within frameworks of local urban development. Addressing these foundational questions not only provides a robust philosophical and scientific basis for examining the theory–practice gap in Tehran and Iran, but also establishes the necessary conditions for its principled and sustainable repair.

To facilitate a more precise and more visual understanding of the research findings, the results are synthesized graphically in Figure 5.

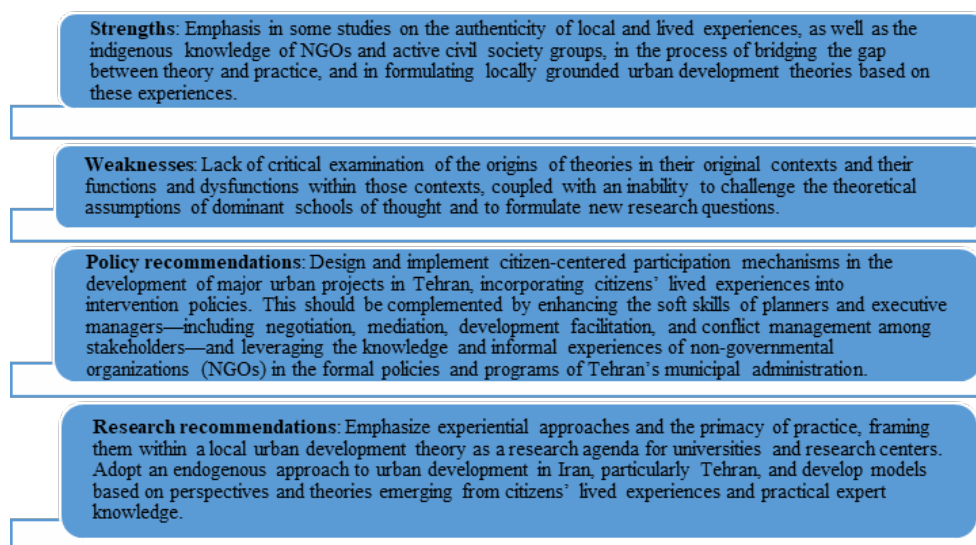


Figure 5. Key findings from the present study: strengths and weaknesses, and policy recommendations

## Authors’ Contributions

First author 100%

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## Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest associated with this study.

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