

Scholars need to move from filling gaps to doing more imaginative and innovative research

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Our 'publish or perish' mentality is sacrificing more imaginative and innovative ideas. Looking at the field of Management studies, [Marcel Bogers](#) writes that a troubling shortage of novel academic ideas must be tackled by new institutional conditions, rethinking professional norms and cultivating a more scholarly identity.



Despite, or probably due to, the increasing importance of (top-tier) publications — think of “publish or perish”, RAE/REF — published articles (including in top-tier journals) increasingly have an incremental contribution at the cost of more imaginative and innovative ideas. In this post, I will discuss this important problem and address the question asked by Mats Alvesson and Jörgen Sandberg in a [forthcoming article](#), ‘has management studies lost its way?’

A paradoxical shortage of interesting studies

In their article, Alvesson and Sandberg argue that there is a troubling shortage of novel ideas and really strong contributions within management studies. This is particularly a problem as the submissions to management journals go up, while the acceptance rate accordingly goes down. This creates a paradox in which one would expect more high-impact papers being published, although in reality the opposite occurs.

A central explanation for this paradox is the strong prevalence of what the authors call “gap-spotting” research. Even though such research may be (increasingly) rigorous in theorizing and methodological procedure, it remains focused on systematically filling a gap in existing research. Instead of these incremental advances, what we need is more research that challenges taken-for-granted assumptions to create more interesting and influential studies—in line with Murray Davis’ (1971) oft-cited article “[That’s Interesting!](#)”

Explaining the dominance of “gap-spotting” research

Gap-spotting research is defined as being positive or mildly critical to earlier studies with the purpose of “extending this literature” or to “address this gap in the literature”. Alvesson and Sandberg identify three main reasons for the dominance of gap-spotting research in management studies, namely:

- **Institutional conditions:** refers to how institutions such as governments, universities, business schools and funding bodies (and their policies) regulate how research is conducted and how research reports are produced. The problem is that many universities use assessment formulas, such as the RAE/REF in the UK, that merely count the number of publications in journals on a designated list. This in turn encourages researchers to publish in a particular journal rather than challenging assumptions and developing more innovative research.
- **Professional norms within the management field:** refers to the fact that journals, editors and reviewers—who are the main professional norm setters—tend to expect and suggest an “adding-to-the-literature” norm. This tends to encourage researchers to stay close to the existing literature and thus develop an incremental contribution. However, as the authors also note, assumption-challenging research still needs to be connected to established literature to be meaningful.
- **Researchers’ identity constructions:** refers to researchers’ internalized norms and conditions that result in an attitude to reproduce those norms and conditions and force other to comply. As a result, researchers become gap-spotters doing incremental adding-to-the-literature research. And connected to the social norms such as “publish or perish” and journals’ orientation and norms that give priority to incremental research of journal, researchers construct an identity as a “journal publication technician” rather than a “genuine scholar”.

Encouraging more innovative and influential research

In order to put management studies back on track, Alvesson and Sandberg argue, we need to move away from the current focus on paper production to the production of more innovative and influential ideas and theories. By making journal publication more a means than an end, these new ideas and theories should make a significant difference to both theory and practice. What this requires is breaking down the above-mentioned reasons for the dominance of gap-spotting research, namely:

- **Revising institutional conditions:** governments should reconsider their focus on counting publications in top-ranked journals, for example by putting more emphasis on citation count and by broadening the publication outlets. Universities could take similar measures, for example in their hiring and promotion decisions, while they could also try to nurture a more scholarly orientation and consensus-challenging research through training and workshops.
- **Rethinking professional norms:** there is a need to reconsider our norms related to journal publication, which for example entails the need to comply with almost all reviewers' comments in a revision process (even though many comments may be inconsistent with each other). An innovative idea could also be "upgraded" and encouraged by de-emphasizing "checklists for faultfinding". Moreover, while rigor in terms of logical consistency and thoroughness remains important, this should not go at the cost of developing more frame-breaking theories instead of merely refining existing ones.
- **Cultivating a more scholarly identity:** academics themselves should also aim at moving from a gap-spotting identity, which entails incremental research in a narrow area. Instead, we should cultivate a more critical and "path-(up)setting" scholarly attitude, which entails being curious, reflective, willing and able to question existing frameworks, consider alternative positions and eager to produce new insights (also at the risk of some short-term instrumental sacrifices).

Alvesson and Sandberg continue by proposing alternative methodologies for theory development to stimulate new and challenging ideas and contributions, namely:

- **Using problematization as a methodology for challenging assumptions:** the aim of the problematization methodology is to come up with novel research questions through a dialectical interrogation of one's own familiar position, other stances, and the domain of literature targeted for assumption challenging.
- **Creating and solving mysteries in empirical research:** empirical material should be used for challenging assumptions underlying existing literature, thus also emphasizing what does *not* work in an existing theory.

Finally, Alvesson and Sandberg summarize some of their suggestions for moving away from a gap-spotting research mode to more a genuine scholarship mode where consensus-challenging rather than consensus-seeking studies are emphasized below.

| Basic features | Gap-spotting mode | Path-(up)setting mode |
|---------------------|-----------------------------------|--|
| Main focus | Consensus-seeking | Consensus-challenging |
| Scope | Narrow area | Spans across areas and theoretical frameworks |
| Research outcome | Additive and incremental theories | Frame-bending theories (sometimes controversial) |
| Publication outlets | Designated journals | Journals, books, book chapters, conference proceedings |

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