

Generating more impactful research through problematization

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A shortage of impactful research

Never have so many worked so hard and published so much, to so little effect

Research focus

Theory vs. practice
&
Rigor vs.
relevance

Research practice problematic

Research drivers -Institutional conditions

Responsible Research in Business and
Management
<http://rrbm.network>

ERA/REF
Research Impact

So, how can we generate more impactful research?

Research questions: A core ingredient in developing impactful theories

“The path to all knowledge leads through the question” (Gadamer, 1994/60: 363)

- *They provide the basic direction and path in our knowledge development.
- *They point at what research design and methodology we should use.
- *They define what theoretical and practical contributions our research is likely to generate.

Major factors influence the framing of research questions

- Fashion and fads
- Availability of research funding
- Journals
- Other researchers
- Career prospects
- Knowledge interest

The centrality of existing literature in the formulation of research questions

While many factors influence the development of research questions, *existing published studies and influential theory* is often the most common as well as the most important source for generating research questions. Why?

Even if a research question originates from elsewhere, the researcher needs to engage with existing literature to further elaborate the tentatively formulated research questions.

Irrespective of how researchers actually go about formulating and reformulating their research questions, it is, “in the crafting of the research text that the final research question is constructed, which is the one that specifies the actual contribution of the study” (Sandberg & Alvesson, 2011: 25).

How do we generate research questions from the literature?

The most common advice is gap-spotting:

“Obviously, the research question should be derived from a gap in the literature”

(Michael A. Hitt (2016) Publishing in the top-journals: the secret of success. In Clark, T., Wright, M., & Ketchen D. J. How to get published in the best management Journals,)

“If you can’t make a convincing argument that you are filling an important gap in the literature, you will have a hard time establishing that you have a contribution to make to that literature”.

(Johanson (2007), Administrative Science Quarterly’s managing editor and her reading of more than 19,000 reviews and more than 8000 decision letters advice that:)

Routes to research questions: Gap-spotting

Basic routes to research questions	Specific versions of basic route
Confusion spotting	Competing explanations Puzzle
Neglect spotting	Overlooked area Under-researched Lack of empirical support Lacking a specific aspect
Application spotting	Extending and complementing existing literature
	Combinations

But does gap-spotting lead to influential theories?

What makes a theory influential?

An influential theory stimulates interest. When stimulate interest, theories will be discussed among colleagues, examined in journals, and presented in textbooks.

So, what makes a theory stimulate interest?

It engages our attention. In order for a theory to engage our attention it needs to interrupt our routinized taken-for-granted world, what we already know.

“What seems to be X is in reality non-X, or what is accepted as X is actually non-X”

“The social researcher who wants to be certain that he [sic] will produce an *interesting* theory about his subject must first familiarize himself with what his audience already assumes to be true about his subject, before he can even begin to generate a proposition which, in denying their assumption, will attract their attention” (Murray Davis, 1971: 337, italics in original)

Original knowledge can never be reduced to a simple reading-off of the ‘real’ because it always presupposes a break with the ‘real’, that is, what we already know about the world (Bourdieu et al. 1991: 14).

From gap-spotting to problematization



While gap-spotting plays a crucial role in the development of existing literature, and varies in both size and complexity it is unlikely to lead to the development of significant theories because it does not deliberately and ambitiously question the assumptions underlying existing literature.

Gap-spotting reinforces rather than challenges already influential theories.



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Problematization as a methodology for developing new theories

Problematization is first and foremost an:

“endeavour to know how and to what extent it might be possible to think differently, instead of legitimizing what is already known” (Foucault, 1985: 9)

Hence, the focal point in problematization is not to scan existing literature to identify gaps to be filled, but:

to illuminate and challenge those assumptions underlying existing theories (including ones own favorite theories) about a specific subject matter.

Assumptions work as a starting point for all knowledge production.

Without an initial understanding of the subject matter, we would have no idea what to look for, how to design our study, what empirical material to collect, and how to analyze and theorize the subject matter.

- *What types of assumptions are relevant to problematize?*
- *How can these assumptions be identified and challenged that has the potential to lead to the development of interesting and influential theory?*

A typology of assumptions open for problematization

In-house: exist within a particular school of thought in the sense that they are shared and accepted as unproblematic by its advocates, while outsiders may not embrace it.

Root metaphor: assumptions that include broader images of a particular subject matter.

Paradigm: ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions, which underlie a specific literature.

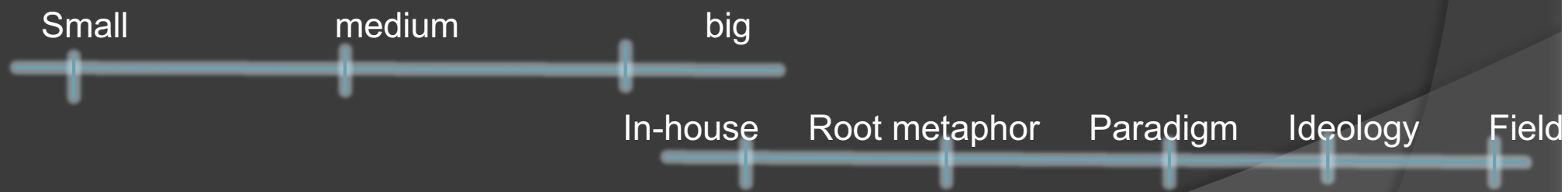
Ideology: include various political, moral, and gender related assumptions held about the subject matter.

Field assumptions: reflect some central aspects of a particular understanding of a subject matter shared by several different schools of thought within a paradigm and sometimes even across paradigms and disciplines.

A continuum from low to high impact research

Gap-spotting:
Identifying gaps in existing literature

Problematization:
Challenging assumptions underlying existing literature



Low impact

Medium impact

Big impact

A problematization methodology

Methodological principles for identifying, articulating, and challenging assumptions

(1) Identifying a domain of literature for assumption-challenging investigations

- In-depth reading of key texts in a field with a focus on its assumptions
- Concentrate on a few authoritative summaries of the field
- Look at a few more recent influential pieces

(2) Identifying assumptions underlying existing theory

Methodological tactics for identifying and constructing assumptions

- In-house: scrutinizing internal debates
- Root metaphor: identifying the basic image of social reality held by a theory
- Paradigm: existing paradigm maps can be useful
- Ideology: view something that is seen as 'good' as 'bad'
- Field: search for commonalities within a field

Methodological principles for identifying, articulating, and challenging assumptions (continued)

(3) Evaluating the articulated assumptions

Are the articulated assumptions worth to problematize?

- Degree of 'truthfulness'
- Theoretical fruitfulness, novelty, and provocative capacity
- Leading to new research programs, practical significance

(4) Developing an alternative assumption ground

What alternative assumptions can be produced that will question the articulated assumptions in step 2?

(5) Consider assumptions in relation to its audience

Typically not one but multiple audiences

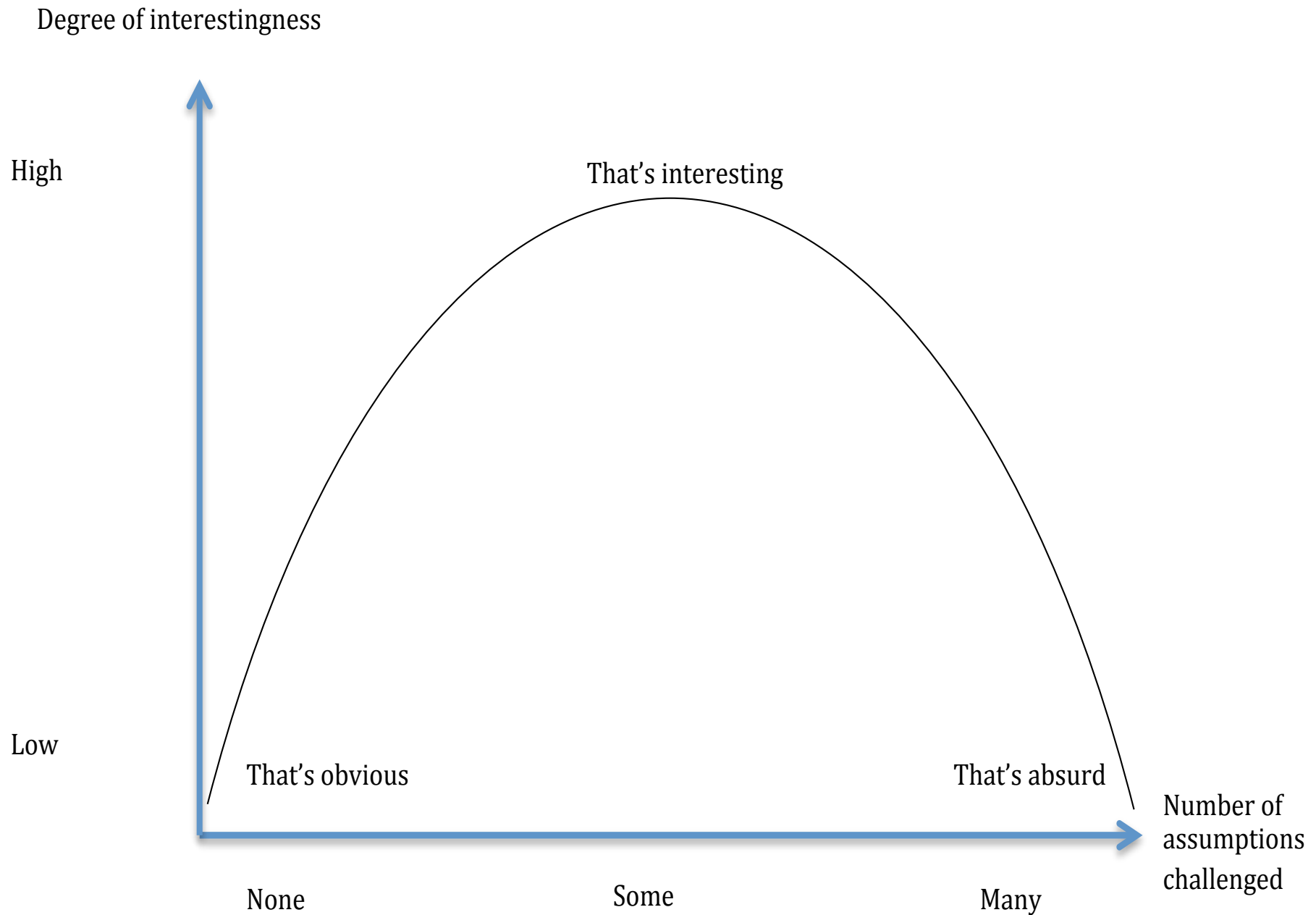
Recognize the politics when challenging assumptions

(6) to evaluate the alternative assumption ground

Identifying the experience of 'this is interesting'

- That's obvious!
- It's absurd!
- That's interesting!

Indicator of the interestingness of a research contribution

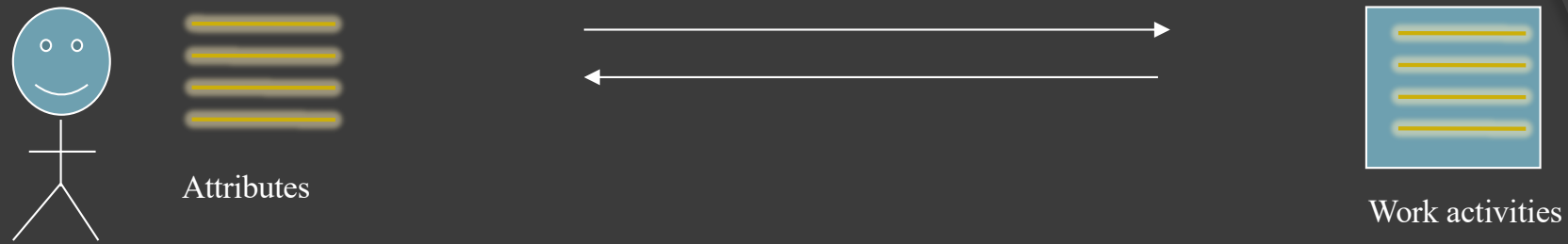


An illustration of how problematization can lead to high impact research

Sandberg, J. 2000. Understanding human competence at work: an interpretive approach. *Academy of Management Journal*, 43/1: 9-25.

Challenge of paradigm assumption

KSA-theories of competence



Competence as consisting of two separate entities: a set of attributes such as knowledge, skills and abilities (KSA) possessed by the worker and a separate set of work activities.

Basic assumption: a dualist ontology

Interpretive approach – basic assumption: relational ontology



Understanding of work as the basis of competence

An additional example: Values

Common assumption:

Individuals have values

Alternative assumptions:

1. Individuals don't have values but take value positions
(*values are strategic and tactical resources for corporate actors*)

2. Discourses rather than individuals produce and carry values
(*Discursive forces operate on the individual and leads to fixed association and Subordination with (organizationally expressed) values.*)

Applying the problematization methodology to your own research

- What phenomenon (e.g. leadership, identity, trust) do you investigate in your study
- What bodies of existing literature are most relevant regarding your research phenomenon?
- What assumptions do they make about the phenomenon in question?
- How can you problematize relevant existing literature in order to generate research questions that are likely to lead to more interesting and influential contributions?

- (1) Identifying a domain of literature for assumption-challenging investigations**
- (2) Identifying assumptions underlying existing theory**
- (3) Evaluating the articulated assumptions**
- (4) Developing an alternative assumption ground**
- (5) Consider assumptions in relation to its audience**
- (6) Evaluate the alternative assumption ground**

A final advice

How can we generate more influential research?

Be a genius

Use drugs

Cultivate perversions “Successful scientists ... are intuitively perverse, always ready to question accepted world views and create opportunities for the critical rejection of what is taken as given by others.” (Astley, *ASQ* 1985: 503-504)

Or you can

Read some of the following texts

(Further readings on how to generate more impactful research)

*Alvesson, M., & Sandberg, J. (2013/2023). *Constructing research question: Doing interesting research*. London: Sage.

*Alvesson, M., & Sandberg, J. (2022). Pre-understanding: An interpretation-enhancer and horizon-expander in research. *Organization Studies*, 43: 395-412.

*Alvesson, M. & Sandberg, J. (2021). *Re-imagining the research process: conventional and alternative metaphors*. London: Sage.

*Alvesson, M., & Sandberg, J. (2020). The Problematizing Review: A Counterpoint to Elsbach and Van Knippenberg's Argument for Integrative Reviews. *Journal of Management Studies*, 57: 1290-1304.

*Alvesson, M., & Sandberg, J. (2014). Habitat and habitus: Boxed-in versus box-breaking research. *Organization Studies*.

*Alvesson M., & Sandberg, J. (2011). Generating research questions through problematization. *Academy of Management Review*, 2: 247-271.

The art of developing interesting and impactful research - Wednesday at 8.30-10.20.