Wissenschaftstheorie

Was ergibt einen Beitrag zur Theorieentwicklung?

Andreas Georg Scherer

Quelle: Alvesson, M. / Sandberg, J. 2011: Generating Research Questions Through Problematization. In: *Academy of Management Review 36*: 247-271

Overview:

Two approaches for finding research questions within management research (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011):

1) **Gap spotting**
2) **Problematization**

<u>Question</u>: which strategy leads to significant advancements in theory development?

What makes a theory successful?

When is a theory successful?

- dominant view: when it is „true"

- Davis (1971): when it is not only „true" not but also challenging already existing theories

→ Main challenge for the researcher when developing theory:
  on the one hand one needs to draw on existing research and theory, on the other hand one's theory needs to be distinct

Where does the research question come from?

1) Gap spotting (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011):

- find a gap in existing research (e.g. about one particular characteristic of a practical phenomenon as it is studied in a specific discipline) that needs to be filled in order to „add an other piece to the puzzle"

- Research questions are either identified by the researcher
  - by finding an unanswered question within a theory/practical problem
  - assumption: research question or problem exists independent of researcher

- ... or constructed by the researcher
  - by arranging existing studies in specific ways that hasn't been done so far
  - assumption: research question does not exist independent of the researcher

Where does the research question come from?

2) Problematization (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011):

The underlying assumptions of a theory are questioned in order to advance theory on more fundamental grounds.

Weaknesses of gap spotting

Alvesson & Sandberg (2011):

- criticize **gap spotting** for under-problematizing existing theory and therefore not contributing to real advancement

- at the same time: gap spotting seems to be the dominant approach in management research

- this is the case across research paradigms: for positivist as well as interpretive research, for descriptive as well as critical research

- reasons in sociopolitical research environment: journal politics and career pressure, especially for young scholars

→ Alternative: **Problematization** as a research ideal as well as a methodology for the construction of research questions

Problematization as methodology

Problematization as methodology (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011)

- critique of existing critical approaches (critical theory, postmodernism): even they are caught in their own ideologies, use „ready-made" frameworks for criticizing other schools of thought; they „apply rather than challenge the literature they follow" (p. 252)

- in contrast, fundamental problematization is about challenging not only others underlying assumption, but also one's own as underlying assumptions

- „dialectical interrogation of one's own position"

→ Guiding questions in establishment of problematization as methodology:

- What types of assumptions can be problematized in existing theories?

- What are the methodological principles for doing so?

„Thus, by elaborating and proposing problematization as a methodology for generating research questions, we do not take any particular paradigmatic stance more than we embrace the general and long-held metatheoretical assumption within academia that all knowledge is uncertain, truths or theories cannot be accepted as given, researchers tend to be conformist and paradigm bound (Kuhn, 1970), and theoretical developments are partly based on rethinking and challenging fundamental assumptions underlying dominating theories (Tsoukas & Knudsen, 2004)."
(Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011, p. 253)

Prof. Dr. Andreas Georg Scherer, Lehrstuhl für Grundlagen der BWL und Theorien der Unternehmung, Universität Zürich

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Problematization as methodology

Problematization as methodoolgy needs to follow **two central questions** when setting up a research design (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011):

1) What **types of assumptions** are relevant to consider?
2) How can these assumptions be **identified, articulated, and challenged** to lead to as theoretical advancement?

Prof. Dr. Andreas Georg Scherer, Lehrstuhl für Grundlagen der BWL und Theorien der Unternehmung, Universität Zürich

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1) Typology of assumptions

1) Typology of assumptions (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011):

- **In-house assumptions:**
  assumptions on one specific subject that are shared by proponents within one school of thought

- **Root metaphor assumptions:**
  broader images of a subject matter

- **Paradigmatic assumptions**
  ontological, epistemological, methodological assumptions

- **Ideology assumptions:**
  politics-, moral-, and gender-related assumptions

- **Field assumptions:**
  assumptions that are shared by different schools of thought within a research field/discipline/paradigm

Prof. Dr. Andreas Georg Scherer, Lehrstuhl für Grundlagen der BWL und Theorien der Unternehmung, Universität Zürich

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2) Identifying, articulating, and challenging assumptions

2) Identifying, articulating, and challenging assumptions (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011):

Iterative process that consists of the following activities

- identifying domain of literature
- identifying assumptions in this domain
- evaluation of assumptions
- developing alternative assumptions
- considering relation to audience
- evaluation of alternative assumptions

2) Identifying, articulating, and challenging assumptions

2a) Identifying domain of literature

- more narrow literature coverage than in gap spotting, (since one doesn't need to make sure that the own idea hasn't been covered before)

- instead: in depth reading

- first step: identify target domain
second step: choose specific important texts

2b) Identifying and articulating underlying assumptions

- very often theories have implicit assumptions that are not explicitly made salient by researchers

- implicit assumptions reveal themselves only through close reading and the reader's background knowledge on potentially used assumptions

2) Identifying, articulating, and challenging assumptions

2c) Evaluating articulated assumptions:

Central Question: what is the theoretical potential of challenging an assumption?

2d) Development of alternative assumptions:

- „test "existing alternative approaches as suitable frameworks
- e.g. explain something from a criitcal perspective that so far has only be explained from a positivistic perspective
- but: no limitation to one particular alternative, rather experimenting with different alternatives

2) Identifying, articulating, and challenging assumptions

2e) Considering alternative assumptions in relation to the audience

Academics vs. practitioners?

Recognize politics involved what type pf challenge might be accepted cognitively and emotionally -> still be strategic! Here problematization of ideology, paradigm, field assumptions is particularly tricky

2f) Evaluating alternative assumptions

It needs to be interesting! -> rigor vs. relevance vs. "interestingness"?

Different strategies for different assumption types

Which identifying / articulating / challenge strategies are suitable for which assumption types (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011)?

- **In-house assumptions**:
  identified in internal debates between authors within a research group where narrative style/vocabulary is similar

- **Root metaphor assumptions**:
  identified by finding and analyzing the basic image/metaphor within a school of thought (e.g. „organization as communication")

- **Paradigm assumptions:** get familiar with paradigm debates and use existing frameworks to map theories (e.g. Burrell and Morgan)

- **Ideological assumptions:** one needs to be aware of alternative views prior to research to contrast ideological assumptions of a theory to alternative ones -> better understanding by highlighting distinctions

Different strategies for different assumption types

Which identifying / articulating / challenge strategies are suitable for which assumption types?

- **Field assumptions:**
  look into different schools of thought to see what they have in common
  (-> gap spotting is in fact a field assumtion on how to do research within
  the management research community)

Open Questions:

- What might be convincing advantages of gap spotting?

- Is problematization dependent on gap spotting because a gap in existing literature that can't be answered by traditional approaches is a motivation (and legitimation) for questioning underlying assumptions?

- Is problematization as a methodology an ideology itself?