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Article

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That's replicable: building cumulative knowledge in the face of fads, obsessions and malpractices

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to provide an incisive commentary on the role of replication in advancing knowledge accumulation in organizational science. For research to be credible, it must be replicable. However, replication studies are seldom published in high-quality management research journals. Drawing on insights from other disciplines, this essay offers a critical analysis of the replication process. The central conclusion of the essay is that replication should be firmly integrated into the scientific process within management and related fields. Doing so will not only advance robust and reliable theories but also yield valuable lessons for managerial practice and inform sound policymaking.

Design/methodology/approach – To structure the argument that replication ensures the validation of theories, refinement of methodologies and greater applicability of research findings, this essay uses Simon Sinek's Why, How and What framework to highlight the essential role of replication research in advancing management studies. By addressing why replication is critical, how it can be effectively conducted and what the authors can do to promote replication research in organizational studies, the essay underscores its importance in building a reliable and credible foundation for knowledge.

Findings – Replication serves as a cornerstone of academic rigor, promoting the cumulative growth of knowledge. This essay outlines the essential steps for conducting robust replications of prior research through three approaches: literal, operational and constructive replication. Furthermore, it proposes actionable strategies for individual, doctoral programs and institutions (i.e. journals and conferences) to enhance transparency and accountability in management research by leveraging replication as a critical tool.

Originality/value – The originality of this essay lies in addressing the underrepresentation of replication research in management, despite its critical role in ensuring scientific rigor. Drawing insights from different



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This essay is inspired by the plenary session of the entrepreneurship division at the 2023 Academy of Management Conference in Chicago (IL), which saw a vibrant discussion on the topic of replication among management scholars from around the world. Of course, all ideas and omissions remain our own. A pre-publication version of this paper was presented at SP Jain Institute of Management Research (Mumbai, India), where it benefitted from the comments and feedback of the audience.

disciplines, it provides a framework for conducting replication studies, emphasizing their value in validating theories and bridging the gap between research and practice. By proposing actionable steps for fostering a culture of replication, the essay advocates for increased transparency and accountability in management research. Its main contribution lies in highlighting the necessity of replication as a foundation for robust theory-building, practical insights and evidence-based policymaking, enhancing the credibility of the field.

Keywords Replication, Knowledge cumulation, Credible research

Paper type Viewpoint

Introduction

Every researcher wants a “Korbut flip” publication [1], a paper that quickly captures attention and wows the audience. Very few papers, however, receive that kind of reception upon publication. A 2020 paper in the prestigious journal *Nature* seemed to be the kind of paper all researchers hope to publish. Coauthored by a team of researchers led by a heavyweight professor, the paper made a stunning claim, drawing hundreds of citations in a short time. Members of the research team launched a startup to capitalize on their findings, attracting millions in investment (Subbaraman, 2024).

After the initial euphoria, other scientists questioned the methodology and argued that the findings are likely invalid. A different research team called the original claim “a fiction”, publishing their critique in another journal (Gihawi et al., 2023). The concerns raised about the original article were quite serious. In 2024, *Nature* retracted the original article. Publishers and journal editors of other studies relying on the data of the 2020 study began reviewing papers for possible amendment or retraction.

It may not seem like it, but the above – that is, self-correction – is an essential characteristic of good science. As Merton (1942) reminded us, all knowledge claims are subject to verification, after which they may turn out to be correct or wrong. Good science does not mean that wrong or incorrect knowledge claims are not made. On the contrary, good science means knowledge claims are subjected to editorial scrutiny and peer review, and once published, scrutinized by the broader profession for accuracy and robustness. To quote Ioannidis (2012:645), “if something is wrong,” sooner or later, “a replication effort will show it to be wrong and the scientific record will be corrected.”

Is research in management and organizational studies self-correcting? The answer, unfortunately, is NO. When a top journal in our field publishes an article, the knowledge claims made therein are simply assumed to be true. Rarely are knowledge claims in our discipline subjected to independent replication for verification and confirmation.

Even when management scholars directly replicate published work and challenge previous knowledge claims, the findings of the original paper are rarely corrected or retracted. Consider the claim that investors respond more negatively to the announcement of Black CEO appointments than to White CEO appointments, captured using average abnormal returns of -4.2% and 0.58% , respectively (Gligor, Novicevic, Feizabadi, & Stapleton, 2021). Using a comparable sample (Black CEOs of public firms in the USA), a subsequent investigation found that markets react positively to the appointment of Black CEOs with an average abnormal return of $+3.1\%$ (Jeong, Mooney, Zhang, Quigley, et al., 2023). Notably, Gligor et al. (2021) reported that 83 of the 1,662 CEO appointments in their sample involved Black CEOs, while Jeong, Mooney, Zhang, Quigley, et al. (2023) found only 57 Black CEOs in 4,609 CEO appointments. Recognizing the conflicting findings of the two studies, Bermis, Green, and Hand (2023) conducted another independent replication, finding positive mean cumulative abnormal returns for Black CEO appointments. As a result of the findings reported in two independent replications, one would assume that the “primary

conclusions of the [original] paper have been forcefully refuted by subsequent empirical research” (Wright et al., 2024:20). Yet, the original paper was neither modified nor retracted. It continues to accumulate citations even after the publication of studies questioning its findings (e.g. Preston & Carton, 2024).

Imagine a think-tank, governmental task-force or large institutional investor commissioning a report about the conditions faced by African-Americans after they ascend to the CEO role, a position widely considered to be “the pinnacle of power, influence, and leadership” (Ryan et al., 2016:447). Such a report would likely say that evidence on market reactions to appointment of Black CEOs is mixed, just as some scholars have cited the conflicting studies to contend that evidence on market reaction to Black CEOs is mixed (e.g. Recendes, Chandler, Huang, & Hill, 2024). But is the evidence on market response to Black CEOs really mixed? What if the provocative claim of Gligor et al. (2021) was a result of statistical or computational errors, or worse, intentional malpractices (Lee, 2023)? We have no way of knowing, and the field has no way of separating fact from fiction.

Our purpose in the present study is to articulate a replication-based agenda for management research that is cumulative and robust. To organize our arguments, we use Simon Sinek’s Golden Circle, which rests on the three pillars of *Why, How and What*, made popular by his 2010 TED talk, among the most popular talks on the platform (TED., 2024) [2]. Specifically, we explain why more replications are needed in management scholarship, how good replication can be conducted and what can be done for management research to become more replicable and thus more robust and reliable. Only replicable research, which – by definition – is robust and reliable, can help make management scholarship self-correcting and therefore more credible (Lee & Wang, 2020).

Why replication?

Management scholars have long acknowledged a gap between academic research and management practice. Awareness of the research-practice gap has sparked interest in evidence-based scholarship, which emphasizes a “commitment to evidence [...] in influencing policy and practice” (Morrell, 2008:614). Yet, for many – perhaps most – critical questions in management, no consensus has emerged, as different studies often produce conflicting results. A key obstacle to building credible knowledge in the field is the “scattered pattern of knowledge accumulation” (Tsang & Yamanoi, 2016:2292). Once a knowledge claim is published, further studies seem unappealing unless they offer something new. Without replication, which ensures consistency across methods and measures, it is challenging to build a credible body of knowledge for practitioners. The lack of cumulative, evidence-based insights perpetuates the academic-practitioner divide, making it less likely that academic inquiry will impact managerial practice and policy-making.

The publication process in scientific research often prioritizes novel and intriguing findings, incentivizing researchers to produce results that stand out. This emphasis on novelty can be traced back to Davis (1971) encouraging generations of researchers to focus on findings that are “interesting and different” (Kilduff, 2006:253); without such qualities, “no value was added” (Eden & Rynes, 2003:680). This bias toward surprising, positive results can push researchers toward practices that make findings appear groundbreaking, even if it involves selectively reporting data or, in extreme cases, committing fraud. The pressure to publish only “significant” findings risks compromising research integrity, prioritizing visibility over reproducibility. Over time, the focus on novelty has become an obsession with newness, drawing criticism from scholars concerned about the pitfalls of provocative claims that challenge the status quo without rigorous empirical basis.

Our fascination with novel research is also fueled by a susceptibility to intellectual fads and fashions (Miller, Hartwick, & Le Breton-Miller, 2004). Scholars have observed that management ideas often “emerge suddenly, flow rapidly, and then vanish equally quickly, sometimes without a trace” (Piazza & Abrahamson, 2020:264), or reappear under new labels (Abrahamson & Eisenman, 2008). Like cultural fads, fashionable ideas, both in management practice and research, create buzz, captivate groups of enthusiastic followers and then fade. Popular research ideas draw groups of adherents – termed “invisible colleges” by Crane (1972:1) – who shape graduate education, research funding and scholarly agendas (Priem & Butler, 2001). Rigorous examination of new ideas is necessary to validate knowledge claims, yet scholars rarely systematically scrutinize popular topics, often choosing instead to “ride the popularity wave”.

How to replicate?

The reference point for a replication study is a previously published empirical study. Without reference to a particular prior study, there is no replication work. While replication may be performed by scholars who performed the original study (either in the same paper or across different papers), the value of replication is much higher when it is conducted by independent researchers. Replication by independent researchers is critical to enhancing confidence in the findings of a previously published paper.

Lykken (1968) distinguished between three fundamental types of replications: literal, operational and constructive. Since then, other scholars have proposed similar replication classification schemes (e.g. Easley, Madden, & Dunn, 2000; Hendrick, 1990). Yet, there is little guidance on how to conduct each type of replication, a gap we try to address here. *Literal replication*, sometimes called exact replication (Köhler & Cortina, 2021), direct replication (Carlsmith, Ellsworth, & Aronson, 1976), strict replication (Hendrick, 1991) or pure replication (Berthon, Pitt, Ewing, & Carr, 2002), entails duplicating the initial researcher’s sample, measures, and analytical techniques [3]. Schmidt (2009) refers to literal replication as “replication without novelty”, positing that it is achieved by strict adherence to the “recipe” described in the method section of the original publication. Many researchers refer to literal replication as reproduction (Köhler & Cortina, 2023), which involves reproducing both the data and findings of a published paper. Notably, literal replication is generally the one most closely associated with the term “replication” in the minds of most researchers. When literal replication fails to yield evidence consistent with the original study, it suggests that the original claims resulted from statistical oversights, errors or malpractices (Maxwell, Lau, & Howard, 2015) [4].

Failure to replicate previously published work may be due to mistakes on the part of the researcher(s). More serious are papers that make dubious claims due to research malpractices. Harvey (2019) distinguished between two types of researcher malpractices: hard misconduct or fraud (fabrication and falsification) and soft misconduct or dubious research practices (p-hacking and data choices). Some believe that hard misconduct is rare in management research, with soft conduct being the “bigger problem” in our field (Harvey, 2019). Unfortunately, there is no empirical basis for this claim, as no systematic effort has been made so far to collect solid data on the prevalence of misconduct in management research (or other disciplines in business scholarship). Even when data, summary statistics or results of the original study are not reproducible in subsequent work (e.g. Gupta, Mortal, & Guo, 2018; Jeong, Mooney, Zhang, Quigley, et al., 2023), it is uncommon for researchers to delve into the exact reasons for non-replicability (Lee, 2023). While there have been some discussions about questionable research practices that result in “false positive” findings (Block & Kuckertz, 2018:357), the extent to which the results of specific studies are the

result of soft or hard misconduct is rarely explored by researchers. Reluctance on the part of authors and editors to consider why a particular study failed to replicate in subsequent investigation(s) impedes knowledge accumulation in the field by making it difficult to distinguish “honest mistakes” from fabrication and fraud (Schwab et al., 2023).

At first glance, literal replication seems to be easy and straightforward (Obenauer, 2024). Yet, adhering to the methodological description of a published paper is often fraught with challenges due to missing information (Schmidt, 2009). Published papers in management research rarely include complete information about all their decisions (Schwab & Starbuck, 2017). There are now several documented efforts to reproduce published articles that are believed to have failed because of crucial missing information (Bergh, Sharp, Aguinis, & Li, 2017; Crawford et al., 2022). Further, researchers are often unwilling to help with independent reproduction of data and findings of their published papers, making it difficult to fill in the gaps with unstated aspect(s) of data collection and analyses not readily obvious from the sample and methodological description (Lee, 2023). Conducting literal replication is, therefore, fraught with challenges, which often go unrecognized in the literature.

Operational replication repeats the same procedures from the original investigation but draws on a different sample (Ziv, 1988). Such replication functions to demonstrate that the results of an original study are obtainable in other samples (Schmidt, 2009). For Bettis, Helfat, and Shaver, (2016), operational replication is a “slightly less narrow form of replication” than literal replication, as it involves using the same research design on data different from the original investigation. While operational replication does not usually speak to possible errors or manipulations in the original study, the usefulness of operational replication lies in establishing whether the effect exists outside the narrow confines of the original investigation. When independent researchers repeatedly fail to verify the claim of a published paper via operational replication, it can seriously undermine confidence in the veracity of the original study. For example, several independent researchers were unable to find evidence for Bem’s (2011) controversial claim about paranormal ability of individuals to “feel” the future in different samples (Galak, LeBoeuf, Nelson, & Simmons, 2012; Wagenmakers, Wetzels, Borsboom, & Van Der Maas, 2011), ultimately discrediting the original study (Maxwell et al., 2015).

We are not aware of similar discrediting in management research using operational replication, partly because – we think - management scholars often overlook the importance of replicating findings in samples different from the original publication. Yet, operational replication has helped raise questions about specific previously published management studies. For example, Tsang and Yamanoi (2016) attempted to replicate Barkema and Vermeulen (1998) study of international expansion through startups and acquisitions by Dutch companies using a new sample of Singaporean firms during the period from 1980 to 2000. Based on their findings, Tsang and Yamanoi (2016) conclude that the results of Barkema and Vermeulen (1998) are “largely not generalizable” beyond the original Dutch sample.

An important aspect of operational replication is that for most published research in management – which includes experimental research, survey data and qualitative studies – operational replication may be the only viable option when the authors of the original paper are unwilling to share their data. Yet, complete non-cooperation by the original authors makes it difficult to conduct operational replication of a published paper if the authors do not publicly share their materials. When research materials are made available by the authors, researchers could follow the procedures described in the original study to collect data in a different setting (time, place or population) to confirm the knowledge claims, conducting an operational replication. As we discuss later, authors, reviewers and editors insisting that

research materials are shared when the paper is accepted for publication will help remove an important “roadblock” to the self-correction process of science, greatly enhancing operational replication in our field.

The well-known “replication crisis” in psychological inquiry (Wiggins & Christopherson, 2019) – which refers to failure to replicate a significant proportion of results in psychology (Hensel, 2021) – is the result of operational replication (although it is often misunderstood to be a case of literal replication). Specifically, 270 independent researchers tried to replicate the knowledge claims made in 100 experimental and correlational studies published in three high-quality psychology journals (OSC, 2015). The replicating authors contacted “the original authors for study materials”, prepared “a study protocol and analysis plan” and obtained “review of the protocol by the original authors,” among other steps to ensure high fidelity to the studies selected for replication (OSC, 2015). The findings of this large-scale replication were published in the journal *Science*, showing that only 39% of the studies were able to reproduce the statistically significant effects of the original studies – and with only half the magnitude of the original effects. While the open science collaboration findings are believed to have “created an upheaval in the scientific community” (Frias-Navarro, Pascual-Llobell, Pascual-Soler, Perezgonzalez, & Berrios-Riquelme, 2020:619), it must be remembered that the researchers were revalidating the original hypotheses in new samples.

Constructive replication takes as given only the “empirical facts” claimed by the original study, providing the replicator with the flexibility to introduce new sampling, measurement techniques and analytical tools to the investigation (Mittelstaedt & Zorn, 1984). For Makel and Plucker (2014), constructive replication is a “creativity act” that introduces different methodology to validate the same underlying predictions. There are two key benefits of constructive replication. First, constructive replication does not require cooperation from the original authors, as the replicating researcher is free to use novel sampling, techniques and analyses as needed. Second, constructive replication can deploy more modern or better analytical tools and/or data that may not have been available to researchers at the time of the original investigation.

Making changes to the research design (including sample, methods and analysis) can be a “slippery slope” because of the introduction of additional possible explanations for differences arising in the replication study (Köhler & Cortina, 2021). When a replication study departs much from the published paper it claims to replicate, it may no longer be considered a replication of the previous paper. If there is no meaningful connection with the original research in terms of methodological choices, the replicating authors are unable to verify, refute or extend the results of the previous research in a credible manner. For example, Stella and Adam (2008) reexamined the claim that whereas simple tropes are more memorable than complex tropes, complex tropes are more persuasive than simple tropes (Toncar & Munch, 2003). Toncar and Munch (2010) disagree with the changes in research design made by Stella and Adam (2008), arguing that crucial deviations in data collection and analysis from Toncar and Munch (2003) likely “account for their lack of results” (p. 79).

What can be done?

We now turn our attention to what can be done for replication to take its rightful place in management research. It is notable that “independent replication studies” remain scarce in “leading management journals” (Block, Fisch, Kanwal, Lorenzen, & Schulze, 2023:3). Replications “represent only 1.47% of published research in leading journals,” and even within this small body of work, “replications by independent researchers are very rare” (Ryan & Tipu, 2022:1). Addressing this shortfall requires a multilevel approach, spanning across individuals, journals, gatekeepers and professional associations.

At the individual level, all doctoral students would benefit from undertaking at least one replication effort before embarking on their dissertation project. Currently, very few doctoral students pursue replication work. From closely observing doctoral training over the past two decades, the first two authors of this essay have seen tremendous merit in students engaging directly with replication studies, particularly those related to their research interests. Replicating a quality published paper allows students to deepen their understanding of research design, analyze data critically and interpret empirical results, all while gaining a richer appreciation of the phenomena they study. Beyond these technical skills, students also develop their ability to present and discuss research findings with their peers. The third coauthor of this essay, a third-year doctoral student, for example, has already engaged in several replication efforts during the PhD program, some of which she presented at top management conferences (where she was often the only one presenting a replication paper).

We agree with Schwab et al. (2023) that replication can help doctoral students appreciate “the complexity arising from” the many intertwined steps of an empirical paper. However, we disagree with their assertion that replication is only suited to students who are not “capable of formulating innovative research and carrying it out” (p. 20). On the contrary, replication can be an essential learning exercise for all doctoral students. In our experience, doctoral students routinely underestimate the methodological demands of empirical papers publishable at top journals. Even doctoral students who assist professors in scholarly projects targeted at prestigious journals often play a marginal role in making key research decisions. Taking ownership of a replication project therefore helps doctoral students gain critical empirical skills they may not be able to acquire otherwise. Furthermore, replication work pursued for individual learning purposes has positive externalities for the whole field. When researchers, especially senior scholars, know their work may be subject to replication by doctoral students, they are incentivized to uphold the highest standards of rigor, thereby benefiting the discipline.

Professors can also play an important role in fostering replication by integrating it into doctoral coursework. Currently, it is common for doctoral courses in management to ask students to identify a novel research question and draft a paper explaining how the question is empirically examined. Instead of the conventional focus on novel research ideas, faculty can ask students to pick a published paper they want to replicate. Including replication studies in coursework not only normalizes the practice but also underscores the importance of reliability in research. Reviewing both original papers and their replications allows faculty to delve into the nuances of research design and data analysis in a way that deepens students’ understanding of empirical methods. A replication-focused approach also conveys to emerging scholars the importance of producing replicable work in their own studies, knowing that their findings could one day be revisited critically.

For replication to gain traction in the field, gatekeepers such as journal editors and conference organizers must also recognize its value. The submission process at leading journals and conferences often requires authors to select keywords that describe their work. These keywords influence how the work is positioned within the field and determine which reviewers are assigned. However, replication is rarely an available keyword, an indicator of its marginalization. Without appropriate keywords, replication papers risk being assigned to reviewers who prioritize novelty above all else or have little interest in robust results. Furthermore, we are not aware of any management journals that have appointed editors focused on replication. The lack of editorial specialization hinders the publication of high-quality replication studies, which often require editors with a deep understanding of the

methodological complexities involved in replicating previously published knowledge claim. Appointing replication-focused editors would be a meaningful step toward elevating replication in the field.

Journals that take a proactive approach to require accepted authors to share their data and code can play an invaluable role in advancing the replication agenda. Some journals have already adopted policies that could serve as models. For instance, *Group and Organization Management* mandates that authors deposit their research data in public repositories and include data availability statements within their papers. Similarly, prestigious journals in finance (such as *Journal of Finance* and *Review of Financial Studies*) require authors to provide their code on acceptance, despite the initial pushback from editorial board members as happened at *Journal of Financial Economics* (Harvey, 2014). The *American Economic Review* has detailed data and code-sharing policies that have been in place since 2005 and revised in 2019. Adopting similar requirements in management journals would reduce barriers to replication while preserving proprietary data rights. If prestigious management journals do not catch up to elite journals in allied disciplines on the important issue of sharing data or codes, it will hurt the reputation of management journals in business schools.

Over the past decade or so, there has been some progress in publishing replication research, but change has been slow. Several elite journals have published special issues dedicated to replication in recent years, including *Strategic Management Journal* (Bettis et al., 2016) and *Journal of Management* (Köhler & Cortina, 2021). New journals, such as *Journal of Management Scientific Reports* and *Journal of Business Venturing Insights*, have also given special attention to replication studies, publishing papers that have raised questions about the results of previously published papers (Bermiss et al., 2023; Honig & Samuelsson, 2014). These initiatives have highlighted both the value of replication and the importance of identifying studies that fail to replicate.

Despite these advances, replication research remains uncommon in top management journals. The pipeline of replication work-in-progress is quite shallow as well, as evidenced from papers presented at top management conferences. To further the cause of credible scholarship, top-tier journals should commit to publishing at least one replication paper in every issue (thanks to Benson Honig for this potentially game-changing suggestion). Whether the replication findings affirm or refute the original results, rigorous replication work enhances the cumulative nature of knowledge in the field. Affirmative replications enhance confidence in existing knowledge claims. Refutative replications cast doubt on the veracity of published knowledge claims. All management journals should be open to publishing affirmative and refutative replications of articles published in any quality journals, be it in the form of a commentary, research report or brief. Embracing replication-friendly policies at prestigious management journals would encourage researchers to pursue replication work, fostering a culture of reliability and rigor in management research, making organizational science truly self-correcting.

Replication is not merely an academic exercise but a cornerstone of scientific progress. By embedding replication into doctoral training, normalizing it in coursework and fostering institutional support through journals and professional associations, management research can achieve greater reliability and credibility. The field will benefit from a collective commitment to replicability, building a stronger and more trustworthy foundation for future inquiry.

Conclusion

Replication offers scholars the opportunity to address some substantive questions and advance management theory and practice. However, researchers have little incentive to replicate previously published studies because the various stakeholders – promotion

committees, editors and reviewers – favor novel knowledge claims. The bias for novelty also produces incentives to engage in questionable research practices, which is exacerbated by the “publish or perish” culture in academia. Our goal here is to advance a replication-based research agenda that emphasizes robust and reliable knowledge claims for management scholarship. While the dearth of replication studies in management science has a long history, it does not have to remain that way going forward. We hope our article will trigger debate on replication efforts and that our colleagues will take up this agenda and contribute to the scientific progress of the field, develop better theories and glean useful lessons for practice.

Notes

1. Named for the Belarusian gymnast Olga Korbut competing for the Soviet Union in the 1972 Olympics, the Korbut flip involves jumping backwards off the high bar and re-grasping it from below on the under-swing. Korbut’s backflip on the uneven bars was quite daring and novel at the time.
2. Simon Sinek is a popular motivational speaker and author, but his work has had little traction with academics.
3. The different labels are not just semantic differences as they also portend important variations in replication approach that can confound researchers even veteran researchers. For example, some have defined exact replication as operationalizing both the independent and the dependent variable in exactly the same way as the original study, but not requiring the same sample (Stroebe & Strack, 2014:60), which is different than the explanation of literal replication provided here.
4. Discrepancy between a replication and the originally published paper may also result from the garden of forking paths, which refers to various choices and assumptions made by scholars in their search for statistical significance (Gelman & Loken 2014). Yet, it is worth remembering that literal replication means – as much as possible – adhering to the same exact path as described in the original paper.

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