


DIALOGUE, DEBATE, AND DISCUSSION

## Myopia Versus Pluralism as the Basis for Responsible Management Research: A Comment on Zhang and Chen

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In a recent essay in *Management and Organization Review*, Zhang and Chen (2024) relay how, as management researchers, they ventured into doing medical research on symptoms of mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on their experience, they offer reflections on the disciplinary standards, research practices, and publishing models in medicine, which, on balance, succeed better, they argue, than management research in supporting credible and responsible research with an obvious and immediate public impact. Zhang and Chen (2024), in turn, throw down the gauntlet and elaborate a simple provocation: *what if management research, as a discipline, would be in its scientific aims, research practices, standards, and publishing model more like medicine?*

This provocation comes, as a thought experiment, at an opportune time. Management research is still reeling from its own credibility crisis, triggered by the high proportion of singular hypotheses that have been proven weak or even groundless in replications and further tests (e.g., Cornelissen, 2025). Once again, the field is debating how to rigorously produce more relevant and useful knowledge for managers and other stakeholders in society (e.g., Wickert, Post, Doh, Prescott, & Prencipe, 2021). The solutions, standards, and prescriptions proposed so far inevitably reflect the inter-disciplinary character of management research. While some scholars find inspiration in medicine (Zhang & Chen, 2024), others look, for example, at sociology (e.g., methods of public sociology and real utopias; Gümüşay & Reinecke, 2024), or at economics (e.g., econometrics and causal identification; Cornelissen & Kaandorp, 2023).

When methods, practices, or techniques drawn in from adjacent disciplines lead to methodological improvements, incorporating and mainstreaming them might directly strengthen management research, just as it has done in the past (see, e.g., Lupton's (1956) import of ethnographic research methods; or Simon's (1969) mainstreaming of methods drawn from engineering and the 'design sciences'). However, to the extent that any such comparisons move beyond specific techniques to methodology in general or to prescribing models of scientific research (Pfeffer, 1993; Van Maanen, 1995), there is at the same time a risk that any such broader comparisons become one-sided proclamations, with management research being redescribed in the image of the other discipline and with prescriptions being derived in an unmediated form from that source (Pfeffer, 1993). The risk, in other words, is one where any such comparisons, whilst potentially informative, turn into self-standing arguments that simply reflect themselves, marginalize other approaches (Agarwal & Hoetker, 2007), and inevitably give rise to crude oppositions and trade-offs such as theory versus evidence (Davis, 2024), explanation versus prediction (Tsang, 2025), and objectivity versus subjective insight (Meyer, 2025).

To stave off this risk, we argue that the field of management research would benefit from two key strategies when looking for inspiration in adjacent academic fields. First, by engaging in a more thorough and bi-directional – and, in turn, reflexive – examination of what a particular analogy, such as medicine, can offer, focusing not only on advantages but also on limitations. Second, by considering a variety of analogies, compared to myopically anchoring the field on one single discipline-based analogy or comparison. Overreliance on one dominant analogy risks reconceiving – and indeed limiting – the field's entire subject matter and how it is best understood in all its richness and complexity.

Starting with the first point, if instead of a single, largely asymmetrical comparison with medicine, we were to approach the thought experiment more symmetrically and reflexively, we are better able to entertain what medicine has to offer to management research, as well as what it lacks or brings with it that may be less useful or even outright problematic. Clearly, as highlighted by Zhang and Chen (2024), medicine offers, as a corresponding case, potentially informative connections such as being problem-driven, privileging the usefulness and relevance of what it produces as knowledge over abstract theory, and being inclusive of different methodological approaches and scholarly traditions. At the same time, these epistemic norms reflect a biological subject which in terms of its parameters, and 'law-like' regularities is different from the complex, evolving nature of social science phenomena (what Tsang (2025) refers to as their 'open systems' quality and what Van Maanen (1995) previously characterized as the 'indeterminate' and 'open-ended' character of managerial and organizational phenomena). As such, forcing a particular template of description, explanation, and prediction, as forged in medicine, with a corresponding set of epistemological presumptions and standards, onto management phenomena may not be a perfect fit and may, in certain instances, do more harm than good.

In addition, and unlike what Zhang and Chen (2024) suggest, many areas of medicine have been found to switch (too) quickly from description to controlled interventions and predictions from a singular theoretical point of view (as the gateway towards developing medicines and treatments) in ways that crowd out alternative explanations and, in many instances, for the intervention to work assumes a basic 'action mechanism'. The recent controversial case of the amyloid hypothesis (the idea that Alzheimer's is caused by a build-up of amyloid plaques in the brain), suggests how literally limiting such a myopic mechanisms-centered approach can be, with billions of dollars and lives lost in the process (Piller, 2025). Another implicit bias inherent to medicine is the presumption that description, explanation, and prediction are neutral, value-free, and universal acts of gathering robust 'evidence' that structurally cut across genders, ethnicities, and demographics (Zhang & Chen, 2024). On this point, a recent Lancet commission (Ginsburg et al., 2023) powerfully critiques this implicit bias, highlighting the continued mistreatment of women in cancer and how greater attention to other more critical modes of inquiry in the medical field (beyond description/explanation/prediction) could help address this bias and its profound consequences for the health and life chances of women suffering from cancer as well as other diseases. Hence, a much deeper and reflexive examination of the direct and indirect implications of theories, methods, and research designs before importing them from other disciplines is crucial to ensure a responsible use of such models and standards and for productive interdisciplinary cross-fertilization to take place.

A second, related, strategy is to engage with multiple analogies besides the one with medicine rather than relying on a single model of science or privileging a single discipline-based comparison over others (Agarwal & Hoetker, 2007; Van Maanen, 1995). This kind of epistemological pluralism has been a key part of the very foundation of management research, as a scholarly discipline that is simultaneously informed by the theoretical insights, epistemic norms, and methodological standards of other disciplines and scholarly traditions within the social sciences and the humanities (Tranfield & Starkey, 1998; Van Maanen, 1995). Indeed, some have argued that the field's essential character and strength is one of being an 'inter-disciplinary' field that is organized around managerial phenomena and problems and where by drawing on multiple modes of inquiry scholars offers the best possible explanations and informed answers to managers and other stakeholders in society (see, e.g.,

Reinecke et al., 2024; Tranfield & Starkey, 1998). The guiding idea here is that, by design, management research should not be captured by a single point of view but should be organized in such a way that scholars can reflexively draw on the insights and methods of different scholarly disciplines in pursuit of knowledge generation (Cornelissen, 2025; Ghoshal, 2005). This is obviously an epistemological premise, and one that cannot itself be directly confirmed or refuted (Longino, 2001). Indirectly, however, its virtues are demonstrated by how, in comparison, a strong consensus, or singularity of mind, around theory and method (Pfeffer, 1993) among researchers might foster myopia and furthermore shield such paradigms from a continued critically reflexive and ‘open’ scientific pursuit of knowledge (Oreskes, 2019). To this point, Pfeffer (1995) noted some time ago how, in analogy to economics, paradigm development may organize and sustain research programmes but may not lead to more robust and reliable knowledge in that such paradigms might effectively ‘prevail in the face of modest or few accomplishments’ and ‘achieve dominance, even when their empirical contributions are minuscule’ (Pfeffer, 1995: 684).

Importantly, however, for such pluralism to *work* for management research as a whole, it seems important that management researchers not only draw different analogies with other fields of inquiry (at the level of theory and methods) but also productively bring them together (Agarwal & Hoetker, 2007), subjecting specific ideas, interpretations, or methods ‘to the broadest range of criticism’ (Longino, 2001: 132) and ‘which is likely to lead both to better research and to broadened usefulness’ (Ghoshal, 2005: 88) of what the field as a whole collectively produces. If, on the other hand, the pluralism that the field embraces is far less ‘assertive’ (Freeman, 2010) in that it simply presents a ‘melting pot’ (Agarwal & Hoetker, 2007: 1307) or container for different modes of inquiry running in parallel (Van Maanen, 1995) its potential for ‘greater explanatory power than those [approaches] based on a single discipline’ (Reinecke et al., 2024: 1421) may not be realized, nor may it lead to enhanced insight or produce more vigorous debate and critique.

The two broad strategies outlined above effectively emphasize the importance of a much more elaborated ‘reasoning by analogy’ (Ketokivi, Mantere, & Cornelissen, 2017) process than simply projecting an analogy and prescribing a model to be pursued. Such a process not only make us more aware of the implications of the source domain (such as medicine) but also draws out new insights about the target domain (management research) as part of the elaborated comparison. Indeed, actively working through the suggested comparison, as highlighted by the various commentaries to Zhang and Chen (2024), is helpful in that it may, as an exercise, make us simultaneously more reflexive of our own current aims, practices, and standards, and about where the strengths of management research lie. For example, recognizing the limits of the ‘action mechanisms’ approach in much of medicine (Piller, 2025) may help us reflect more deeply on the kinds of causal mechanisms approaches already circulating in our field and how apt they are to the actual causal complexity of the phenomena under study (Cornelissen & Werner, 2025). Likewise, seeing the historical inequities embedded in much of medicine makes us realize in comparison how important it is to sustain critical, emancipatory traditions of scholarship in the management domain and protect it from the vagaries of a mindless ‘evidence-’based logic (such as we have seen taking hold in economics) that buries its own theoretical assumptions and values (Freeman, 2010) and debunks other traditions as anathema to the ‘scientific method’ (Oreskes, 2019). The comparison, in other words, highlights both positive and negative qualities, as well as both immediate connects and disconnects, which suggest that the analogy with medicine should, beyond any immediate appeal, be considered and worked through in much more nuanced terms and cannot be simply transferred and assumed to hold in an isomorphic, and broadly analogous way, for management research.

In addition, as we have argued, there is an inherent risk of anchoring management research on a single disciplinary model, whether that is medicine, or, to provide another popular alternative, a computer science version of management research (and what is now quickly becoming established as ‘*in silico*’ computational management research). Apart from any immediate insights that such a reframing brings, staking large parts, if not, the entire enterprise of management research on such models is,

in our view, limiting and risks undermining the distinct nature of management research. A pluralistic epistemology (Morgan, 1980; Van Maanen, 1995) is the lifeblood of the field; recognizing this character means as well that instead of a single dominant paradigm (Pfeffer, 1993), management research benefits from harnessing the productive differences across different epistemologies and methodological traditions (entertained through different analogies). As Ghoshal (2005: 88) noted some time ago, the ‘task’ at hand ‘is not one of delegitimizing existing research approaches’, and of privileging one over the other, ‘but one of relegitimizing pluralism’, as the way forward for a respectable area of scholarship that, through the relevant and rigorously vetted knowledge that this in turn produces, takes its responsibility towards its stakeholders in society seriously.

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