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Advocacy and the Search for Truth in Management Scholarship: Can the Twain Ever Meet?

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https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8x99p23z

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Publication Date

2023

DOI

10.1177/10564926231203522

Peer reviewed

Obsession or Kindness?

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Obsession or Kindness?

Eric Tsang (2022) has developed a strong critique of what he characterizes as an obsession or cult in the fields of management and business with Murray Davis's (1971) widely cited article. He helpfully provided a table (Tang, 2022, p. 151) reporting that references to Davis's thesis are substantially more popular in business and management editorial essays than those in a variety of related fields. As someone who has found herself serving as an editor and reviewer, I would like to provide my own view of why I think so many journal editors in our field refer to Murray Davis's article, even to the point, as Erik Tsang (p. 156) notes, of listing interestingness as a criterion for acceptance in the *Academy of Management Journal*. I want to propose that the reason for this emphasis is not the result of an obsession with interestingness over accuracy but in reaction to the many submissions editors and reviewers receive that are not useful to anyone, scholar or practitioner.

My argument is based on the one criterion of interestingness that Erik Tsang did not analyze in his otherwise detailed analysis of Davis's language and logic:

"…an audience will find a theory to be interesting only when it denies the significance of some part of their present 'on-going practical activity' (Garfinkel, 1967) and insists they should be engaged in some new on-going practical activity instead. If the practical consequence of a theory is not immediately apparent to an audience, they will respond to it by rejecting its value until someone can concretely demonstrate its utility: 'So what?' 'Who cares?' Why bother?' 'What good is it?' (Davis, 1971, p. 311)"

As I have argued elsewhere (Pearce, 2004; Pearce & Huang, 2012) too much of our research has no practical value to either educators or practitioners. This is a long-standing complaint in our

field, and I suspect that Murray Davis's article was particularly attractive to our editors because we care about the usefulness of research in our applied field, and he made this point about usefulness by appealing to scholars' vanity and ambition. That is, Murray Davis did not scold researchers about this failing as I and so many others have done but simply reported his own observations and let the ambitious draw their own conclusions. Editors see submission after submission that have taken the authors so many hours of labor and energy to produce something that is no good for anything other than a line on the author's CV; so, it is understandable that editors would send those seeking to submit papers for review to read Murray Davis's engaging analysis. He suggests that a little more thought about why readers should care about implications for others' actions and provides suggestions to help them avoid wasting time and trouble.

In any piece as complex as Murray Davis's article it is only natural for each reader to focus on what was most resonant to them. For me, it was not that Davis tries to articulate why certain theories in sociology have had more impact than others' theories (that may have been equally true or not true), but his articulation of how our scholarship must have some meaning for the actions of others. That advice about how to be clearer about how the research can have implications for readers' new practical actions can be wide: to spark a new direction for readers' own research, to spur a detailed critique of the wrong-headed paper that an unfriendly reviewer cites, or practical advice that we can use in our classrooms or work with practitioners. Good research and theory must have practical action implications to at least some other people. Warning junior colleagues to think through and articulate what those implications for others could be before committing themselves to a labor-intensive research project does not make journal editors or PhD advisors members of an obsessed cult, it is a kindness.

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