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GENERATING RESEARCH QUESTIONS THROUGH PROBLEMATIZATION

MATS ALVESSON
University of Lund and University of Queensland

JÖRGEN SANDBERG
University of Queensland

It is increasingly recognized that what makes a theory interesting and influential is that it challenges our assumptions in some significant way. However, established ways for arriving at research questions mean spotting or constructing gaps in existing theories rather than challenging their assumptions. We propose problematization as a methodology for identifying and challenging assumptions underlying existing literature and, based on that, formulating research questions that are likely to lead to more influential theories.

As researchers, we all want to produce interesting and influential theories. The dominant view is that a theory becomes influential if it is regarded as true. However, in his seminal study Davis (1971) showed that what makes a theory notable, and sometimes even famous (Davis, 1986), is not only that it is seen as true but also, and more important, that it is seen as challenging the assumptions underlying existing theories in some significant way. During the last four decades, a large number of researchers within management and the social sciences have confirmed and elaborated Davis's original thesis in various ways (e.g., Astley, 1985; Bartunek, Rynes, & Ireland, 2006; Black, 2000; Campbell, Daft, & Hulin, 1982; Daft, 1983; Daft, Griffin, & Yates, 1987; Daft & Lewin, 1990; Davis, 1999; Hargens, 2000; Lundberg, 1976; Miner, 1984; Mohr, 1982; Weick, 1989, 2001; Wicker, 1985). For example, McKinley, Mone, and Moon (1999) showed that for a theory to receive attention and establish a new theoretical school, it must differ significantly from, and at the same time be connected to, established literature in order to be seen as meaningful. Likewise, Bartunek et al.'s study of what the board members of the *Academy of Management Journal* considered to be particularly interesting empirical articles provided "support for Davis's (1971) arguments regarding theory: empirical articles that challenge current assumptions are also particularly likely to be viewed as interesting" (2006: 12).

Generating research questions through *problematizion,* in the sense of identifying and challenging the assumptions underlying existing theories, therefore appears to be a central ingredient in the development of more interesting and influential theories within management studies. However, established ways of generating research questions rarely express more ambitious and systematic attempts to challenge the assumptions underlying existing theories (Barrett & Walsham, 2004; Bartunek et al., 2006; Clark & Wright, 2009; Johnson, 2003; Locke & Golden-Biddle, 1997; Sandberg & Alvesson, 2011). Instead, they mainly try to identify or create gaps in existing literature that need to be filled. It is common to refer either positively or mildly critically to earlier studies in order to "extend . . . this literature" (Westphal & Khanna, 2003: 363), to "address this gap in the literature" (Musson & Tietze, 2004: 1301), to "fill this gap" (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008: 221), to point at themes that others "have not paid particular attention to" (Thornborrow & Brown, 2009: 356), or to "call for more empirical research" (Ewenstein & Whyte, 2009: 7). Such "gap-spotting" means that the assumptions underlying existing literature for the most part remain unchallenged in the formulation of research questions. In other words, gap-spotting tends to *underproblematize* existing literature and, thus, reinforces rather than challenges already influential theories.

There are, however, an increasing number of research orientations that directly or indirectly encourage problematization, such as certain versions of social constructionism, postmodernism, feminism, and critical theory. Since the pri-

mary aim of many of these orientations is to disrupt rather than build upon and extend an established body of literature, it could be argued that they tend to *overproblematize* the research undertaken. In particular, these orientations tend to emphasize the "capacity to disturb and threaten the stability of positive forms of management science" (Knights, 1992: 533) as a way to highlight what is "wrong" (e.g., misleading or dangerous) with existing knowledge (Deetz, 1996)—that is, "negative" knowledge is the aim (Knights, 1992). For a large majority of researchers with a more "positive" research agenda—with the aim of advancing knowledge of a specific subject matter—such overproblematization is often seen as inappropriate and unhelpful (Parker, 1991; Rorty, 1992).

Our aim in this study is to integrate the positive and the negative research agenda by developing and proposing problematization as a *methodology* for identifying and challenging assumptions that underlie existing theories and, based on that, generating research questions that lead to the development of more interesting and influential theories within management studies. To be more specific, (1) we develop a typology of what *types* of assumptions can be problematized in existing theories, and (2) we propose a set of methodological principles for *how* this can be done.

We focus only on problematizing assumptions that underlie *existing literature* as a way to construct research questions. We do not discuss how other aspects of the research process, such as general interest, relevance for practitioners, choice of case, and unexpected empirical findings, may influence the research objective and, thus, the formulation of research questions. There is also a large and overlapping body of literature on reflexivity dealing with key aspects of research (e.g., Alvesson, Hardy, & Harley, 2008; Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009; Hardy & Clegg, 1997; Lynch, 2000; Westwood & Clegg, 2003). Since our emphasis is on how to work with reflexivity when formulating research questions, we only marginally address other issues of reflexivity in research, such as invoking awareness of the researcher him/herself, the role of rhetoric, and ongoing constructions of reality in the research process. An exception is the theme of the sociopolitical context of research, which is a key issue for how researchers relate to existing work (Alvesson, Hardy, & Harley, 2008).

The article is structured as follows. We begin by placing problematization in its methodological context by discussing prevalent ways of generating research questions from existing literature. Against this background, we elaborate and propose problematization as a methodology for generating research questions, in four steps: (1) we describe the aim and focal point of the methodology as challenging assumptions underlying existing literature; (2) we elaborate a typology consisting of five broad types of assumptions that are open for problematization in existing theory; (3) we develop a set of methodological principles for identifying, articulating, and challenging assumptions underlying existing literature; and (4) we examine how the developed methodology can be used for generating research questions by applying it to Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail's (1994) well-known article about organizational identity. Finally, we discuss what contributions the methodology can make to theory development within management studies.

GAP-SPOTTING: THE PREVALENT WAY OF GENERATING RESEARCH QUESTIONS

A wide range of studies points to important ingredients involved in formulating good research questions (e.g., Abbott, 2004; Astley, 1985; Becker, 1998; Davis, 1971, 1986; Frost & Stablein, 1992; Locke & Golden-Biddle, 1997; Mills, 1959; Smith & Hitt, 2005; Starbuck, 2006; Van de Ven, 2007; Weick, 1989). However, few of these studies have focused specifically on how researchers construct research questions by reviewing and criticizing existing literature. For example, while Abbott (2004) offers an array of heuristic tools and Becker (1998) suggests a set of tricks of the trade for coming up with new research ideas, these heuristics and tricks "are not specifically aimed at any particular phase or aspect of the research process" (Abbott, 2004: 112).

Prevalent Ways of Constructing Research Questions from Existing Literature

A study that comes close to how researchers construct research questions from research texts is Locke and Golden-Biddle's (1997) investigation of how researchers create an opportunity for

contribution in scholarly journals. They conducted an empirical investigation of eighty-two qualitative articles published in the *Administrative Science Quarterly* (sixty-one studies) and the *Academy of Management Journal* (twenty-one studies) between 1976 and 1996. All of the studies, except eight, created opportunities for contribution by arguing that existing literature was either incomplete or had overlooked an important perspective and that those were gaps that needed to be filled. The remaining eight articles claimed that existing literature was misleading in the way it produced knowledge about a specific topic. A contribution then depended on providing a superior study that was able to correct faulty or inadequate existing literature. These findings by Locke and Golden-Biddle (1997) have been confirmed in more recent studies in the areas of information systems (Barrett & Walsham, 2004) and marketing (Johnson, 2003).

In a more current study of management journals, we specifically investigated how management researchers constructed research questions from existing literature (Sandberg & Alvesson, 2011). In contrast to Locke and Golden-Biddle's, our study comprised a broader set of journals and a mix of qualitative and quantitative studies. We analyzed fifty-two articles from eight randomly selected issues, between 2003 and 2005, of *Administrative Science Quarterly, Journal of Management Studies, Organization, and Organization Studies.* In all of the studies investigated, researchers generated research questions by identifying or constructing specific gaps in existing literature. They tried to either identify competing explanations, to scan for overlooked areas, or to search for shortages of a particular theory or perspective in existing literature. Then, based on those gaps, they formulated their own research questions.

These studies suggest gap-spotting (i.e., identifying or constructing gaps in existing literature that need to be filled) is the most dominant way of generating research questions from existing literature in management. It is, however, important to note that gap-spotting rarely involves a simple identification of obvious gaps in a given body of literature. Instead, it consists of complex, constructive, and sometimes creative processes. As both the Sandberg and Alvesson (2011) and, in particular, Locke and Golden-Biddle (1997) studies show, researchers commonly construct gaps by arranging existing studies in specific ways. For example, one way to create a gap, identified by Locke and Golden-Biddle, is to synthesize coherence in which the researcher "cite[s] and draw[s] connections between works and investigative streams not typically cited together . . . [which] suggests the existence of underdeveloped research areas" (1997: 1030). A gap in existing literature may also be defined by specific negotiations between researchers, editors, and reviewers about what studies actually constitute existing literature and what is lacking from that domain of literature (Bedeian, 2003, 2004; Tsang & Frey, 2007). Moreover, gap-spotting is not something fixed; it may differ in both size and complexity, such as identifying or constructing fairly narrow gaps to more significant gaps, which can lead to important revisions and development of existing literature (Colquitt & Zapata-Phelan, 2007).

Nevertheless, regardless of variations in size and complexity, and regardless of the fact that researchers often creatively construct gaps in existing literature and criticize it for being deficient in some way (e.g., for being incomplete, inadequate, inconclusive, or underdeveloped), they rarely *challenge* the literature's underlying assumptions in any significant way. Instead, they *build* on (or around) existing literature to formulate research questions. In other words, whether researchers merely identify or creatively construct gaps in existing literature, they still adhere to the same purpose—namely, "gap-filling"—that is, adding something to existing literature, *not* identifying and challenging its underlying assumptions, and, based on that, formulating new and original research questions.

The dominance of gap-spotting is not, as one may assume, confined to quantitative or qualitative hypothetico-deductive research; it is also prevalent within qualitative-inductive research. This is clearly the case in our earlier study (Sandberg & Alvesson, 2011) but particularly noticeable in Locke and Golden-Biddle's (1997) investigation of eighty-two qualitative studies, of which a large majority had an inductive research design. The prevalence of gap-spotting in qualitative inductive research is also evident in Lee, Mitchell, and Sablynski's (1999) review of qualitative research in organizational science during the period 1979 to 1999, as well in Bluhm, Harman, Lee, and Mitchell's (2010) follow-up study of the period 1999 to 2008. And it is further

substantiated by Colquitt and Zapata-Phelan's (2007) study of trends in the theoretical contribution and impact of theory-building research and theory-testing research based on a sample of 770 articles published in the *Academy of Management Journal* between 1963 and 2007. Their results indicated "that the typical [inductive research] article published in *AMJ* during our five-decade span either examined effects that had been the subject of prior theorizing or introduced a new mediator or moderator of an existing relationship or process" (2007: 1290).

The widespread activity of gap-spotting in qualitative inductive research is further confirmed in recent editorial advice in the *Academy of Management Journal* to researchers and reviewers about what characterizes high-quality qualitative research. According to the editor, an important feature of high-quality qualitative inductive research is that it discusses "why this qualitative research is needed. . . . For inductive studies, articulating one's motivation not only involves reviewing the literature to illustrate some 'gaps' in prior research, but also explaining why it is important to fill this gap. The latter is often forgotten" (Pratt, 2009: 858). In a similar vein, but more generally, based on her twenty-six years as *Administrative Science Quarterly*'s managing editor (and her reading of more than 19,000 reviews and more than 8,000 decision letters), Johanson offers the following core advice to authors about what journal reviewers expect of the scholarly publication: "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. You might be surprised at how many authors miss this fundamental point" (2007: 292).

The above findings and studies showing the prevalence of gap-spotting research in management studies can, of course, be questioned in various ways. For example, both the Locke and Golden-Biddle (1997) and Sandberg and Alvesson (2011) analyses are based on how researchers presented their studies in published articles, which might have deviated from how they "really" went about generating their research questions. Rhetorical conventions may account for how authors present their research in published texts. Perhaps some researchers problematize the assumptions that underlie existing theory to generate research questions but use a gap-spotting rhetoric when presenting their research in order to get published (Starbuck, 2003, 2006). According to Starbuck, "Authors can increase their acceptance of their innovations by portraying them as being incremental enhancements of wide-spread beliefs" (2003: 349). (See also Bourdieu [1996], Knorr-Cetina [1981], Latour and Woolgar [1979], and Mulkay and Gilbert [1983] for the difference between researchers' work and their publications.)

A closely related explanation of the widespread use of gap-spotting is the political context in which most management research takes place (Alvesson, Ashcraft, & Thomas, 2008; Bourdieu, 2004; McMullen & Shepard, 2006; Sandberg & Alvesson, 2011). It is well known that tenure, promotion, and funding decisions are heavily dependent on being able to publish regularly in quality journals. Challenging assumptions that underlie existing studies is often risky, since it means questioning existing power relations in a scientific field, which may result in upsetting colleagues, reviewers, and editors and, thus, may reduce the chances of having an article published (Bourdieu, 2004; Breslau, 1997; Starbuck, 2003). Therefore, in order to increase the chances of being published, many researchers may carry out gap-spotting rather than more consensus-challenging research (McMullen & Shepard, 2006; Sandberg & Alvesson, 2011).

However, given the increased acknowledgment that challenging the assumptions underlying existing literature is what makes a theory interesting, it seems odd if authors in general deliberately choose to construct research questions through gap-spotting, or if they try to downplay or conceal a strong contribution by dressing it up in gap-spotting rhetoric. It is also likely that reviewers would pick up and challenge a discrepancy between a research purpose that was presented in gap-spotting discourse but produced results that challenged the literature. Moreover, irrespective of how researchers actually go about formulating and reformulating their research questions, and regardless of what social and political norms influence their presentation in journal articles, it is, as noted in Sandberg and Alvesson, "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" (2010: 25). In other words, assumption-challenging research is of limited value if it is

not clearly shown in the published research text. There are, therefore, strong reasons to take the research questions as stated in the published research text very seriously and not regard them as less important than the research questions in operation during the early stages of the research project, which eventually lead up to publication.

Gap-Spotting: An Increasingly Disturbing Problem in Management Studies

The dominance of research seeking the incremental gains of gap-spotting has, over the last two decades, increasingly come to be seen as a disturbing problem in management studies. For example, in their editorial comments in the inaugural issue of *Organization Science,* Daft and Lewin observed a strong "need for reorienting [organizational] research away from incremental, footnote-on-footnote research as the norm for the field" (1990: 1). Reflecting back on the years since launching *Organization Science*, Daft and Lewin (2008: 177) conceded that their original mission had not been realized. They reemphasized the need not to prioritize rigorous empirical research methods but, instead, "new theories and ways of thinking about organizations, coupled with a plausible methodology that grounds the theory" (2008: 182).

The outgoing editors of the *Journal of Management Studies* made similar observations in their concluding reflections on the management field. Based on their six years in office (2003–2008), they commented that while

> we along with many other journals have witnessed a proliferation of articles submitted, it is hard to conclude that this has been accompanied by a corresponding increase in papers that add significantly to the discipline. More is being produced but the big impact papers remain elusive. . . . The emphasis on improving the rigour of theorizing and of empirical method . . . may have led to more incremental research questions being addressed. . . . [And] the impact of the audit culture and incentive system is likely to affect the extent to which both junior faculty and, somewhat surprisingly, highly competent senior faculty (McMullen & Shepherd, 2006) engage in consensus-challenging research. The emphasis on "gap filling" seems to assume that we know what the boundaries of a field look like and tends to dissuade examination of new areas outside this matrix (Clark & Wright, 2009: 6).

In a similar vein, the editors of the *Academy of Management Journal* argued that while the journal is publishing "technically competent research that simultaneously contributes to theory . . . [it is] desirable to raise the proportion of articles published in *AMJ* that are regarded as important, competently executed, and *really interesting*" (i.e., assumption-challenging studies; Bartunek et al., 2006: 9).

The above editorial observations, along with others (e.g., Starbuck, 2006), suggest that the scarcity of more interesting and influential theories is a serious problem in management studies, and to some extent also in social science as a whole (Delanty, 2005). There seems to be a broadly shared sense in management that the field is stronger in producing rigor than it is in producing interesting and influential theories (see also Sutton & Staw, 1995). It is unlikely that further efforts to develop existing or new gap-spotting strategies will overcome the shortage of high-impact research. This is not to say that gap-spotting research is unimportant. It plays a crucial role in developing existing management literature through systematic and incremental additions, as well as through identifying and addressing more significant gaps in it. However, because gap-spotting does not deliberately try to challenge the assumptions that underlie existing literature, it is less likely to raise the proportion of high-impact theories within the management field. It therefore seems vital to support and strengthen attempts at more deliberate, systematic, and ambitious problematization, both as a research ideal and as a methodology for constructing research questions. As an addition to gap-spotting, we aim in this article to develop problematization as a methodology for challenging assumptions underlying existing literature and, based on that, to formulate research questions that may lead to more interesting and influential theories.

PROBLEMATIZATION AS A METHODOLOGY FOR GENERATING RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In this section we develop problematization as a methodology for generating research questions. We first describe the aim and focal point of the methodology. We then elaborate a typology that specifies which assumptions are open for problematization and follow this with a set of principles for identifying, articulating, and chal-

lenging assumptions underlying existing literature and, based on that, constructing research questions that will lead to the development of more interesting and influential theories.

The Aim of the Problematization Methodology

Although gap-spotting and problematization are two distinct ways of constructing research questions from existing literature, it must be recognized that they are not mutually exclusive (Dewey, 1938; Foucault, 1972; Freire, 1970; Locke & Golden-Biddle, 1997; Mills, 1959). Any problematization of a literature domain calls for some scrutiny of particular debates, critiques, and possibly earlier challenges of assumptions in the domain, and most gap-spotting efforts involve some form of modest problematization (in the wider sense of the word—i.e., critical scrutiny). However, we do not see gap-spotting as a genuine form of problematization since it does not deliberately try to identify and challenge the assumptions underlying existing literature in the process of constructing research questions.

There are stronger elements of problematization in debates between advocates of various schools and paradigms (Abbott, 2001, 2004; Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Donaldson, 1985; Reed, 1985, 2004), as well as within more radical orientations, such as postmodernism and critical theory. However, although many of the paradigm warriors and proponents of more radical orientations forcefully critique existing theories, their problematizations are often secondary in the sense that they are more or less "ready-made" by master thinkers, such as a Baudrillardian (Grandy & Mills, 2004) or a Foucauldian perspective on a particular field (e.g., Knights & Morgan, 1991; Townley, 1993). Similarly, countertexts, like Donaldson's (1985), typically aim to defend or reinforce a preferred position but do not offer new points of departure. As Abbott notes, perspectives with a ready-made stance toward social life often have "stock questions and puzzles about it (as in the feminist's questions 'what about *women* and social networks?' 'what about a *gendered* concept of narrative?' and so on)" (2004: 85).

We therefore do not see such prepackaged problematization attempts as genuine either, because they apply rather than challenge the literature they follow, thus mainly reproducing the assumptions underlying their own perspective. Instead, our idea is to use problematization as a methodology for challenging the assumptions that underlie not only others' but also one's *own* theoretical position and, based on that, to construct novel research questions. This is not to say that a problematizer is "blank" or position free. Any problematization necessarily takes its point of departure within a specific metatheoretical position (i.e., epistemological and ontological stance; Tsoukas & Knudsen, 2004: Chapter 1). The ambition is therefore not, nor is it possible, to totally undo one's own position; rather, it is to unpack it sufficiently so that some of one's ordinary held assumptions can be scrutinized and reconsidered in the process of constructing novel research questions. This unpacking is crucial because, as Slife and Williams note,

> to truly evaluate and understand the ideas behind other ideas, we must have a point of comparison. We must have some contrast with implicit ideas or they will not look like ideas. They will look like common sense or truth or axioms rather than the points of view that they really are (1995: 71).

Hence, instead of spotting gaps within a literature domain or applying a prepackaged problematization to challenge the assumptions of others, the aim of the problematization methodology proposed here is to come up with novel research questions through a *dialectical interrogation* of one's own familiar position, other stances, and the domain of literature targeted for assumption challenging. In such a methodology, paradigm and other broader debates, such as behaviorism and culturalism, contextualism and noncontexualism, and choice and constraint (Abbott, 2004: 162–210), and critical frameworks, such as political (Alvesson & Willmott, 1996; Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Foucault, 1977), linguistic (Grant, Hardy, Oswick, & Putnam, 2004), constructionist (Gergen, 1992; Sandberg, 2001), and postmodernist (Cooper & Burrell, 1988; Deetz, 1992; Knights, 1992; Rosenau, 1992), as well as counterresponses to these (e.g., Donaldson, 1985; Reed, 2004), are seen as important methodological *resources* to open up and scrutinize assumptions underlying established theories, including, to some extent, the favorite theory of the problematizer. Such a methodology supports a more reflective scholarly attitude in the sense that it encourages the researcher not

only to use his or her own favorite theoretical position but to start "using different standard stances to question one another . . . [and combining them] into far more complex forms of questioning than any one of them can produce alone" (Abbott, 2004: 87).

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). In other words, problematization, as we define it here, can, in principle, be applied to all theoretical traditions or methodological convictions and can be used within, and against, all, including the problematizer him/herself.

A Note on Theory

Before elaborating problematization as a methodology for generating research questions more specifically, it is important to describe what we mean by "theory." Since there are many views on theories in the management field (Colquitt & Zapata-Phelan, 2007; DiMaggio, 1995; Sutton & Staw, 1995), and since these views are in various ways part of what can and should be targeted for assumption challenging, we are not asserting a strict view on theory. Bacharach's (1989) definition probably comes closest to the wide-ranging view of theory that we adopt here. He defines theory as

> a statement of relations among concepts within a boundary set of assumptions and constraints. It is no more than a linguistic device used to organize a complex empirical world. . . . the purpose of a theoretical statement is twofold: to organize (parsimoniously) and to communicate (clearly) (1989: 496).

Except for Bacharach's broad and open definition of theory, what is particularly close to our own view is his notion that theories are not free-floating statements but are always based on and bounded by researchers' assumptions about the subject matter in question. As Bacharach notes, the boundary set of assumptions is critical to grasp, because "if a theory is to be properly used or tested, the theorist's implicit assumptions which form the boundaries of the theory must be understood" (1989: 498). However, understanding the assumptions that underpin existing theories is important not only for being able to use and test them but also for being able to develop new theories. In particular, without understanding the assumptions that underlie existing theories, it is not possible to problematize them and, based on that, to construct research questions that may lead to the development of more interesting and influential theories (e.g., Davis, 1971).

Challenging Assumptions: The Focal Point in Generating Research Questions Through Problematization

But how can we problematize assumptions in a way that generates novel research questions? Although problematization is featured in various theoretical orientations, such as pragmatism (Dewey, 1916) and actor-network theory (Callon, 1980), Foucault's conceptualization is a good starting point (Castels, 1994; Deacon, 2000). According to Foucault, problematization is first and foremost an "endeavour to know how and to what extent it might be possible to think differently, instead of what is already known" (1985: 9). Such an endeavor does not primarily question how well some constructs or relationships between constructs represent a particular subject matter like "motivation" or "diversity." Instead, it questions the necessary presuppositions researchers make about a subject matter in order to develop the specific theory about it.

As a range of scholars have noted (Bourdieu, 1996; Derrida, 1978/1967; Heidegger, 1981/1927; Husserl, 1970/1900–1901; Merleau-Ponty, 1962/1945), assumptions work as a starting point for knowledge production since they always involve some suppositions or, as Gadamer (1994/1960) put it, prejudices about the subject matter in question. For instance, leadership studies presuppose a set of assumptions that enable us to conceptualize "leadership" as something in the first place, such as trait theory, emphasizing person-bound, stable qualities. Without such an initial understanding of leadership, 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 leadership. The fo-

cal point in problematization as a methodology for generating research questions is therefore to illuminate and challenge those assumptions underlying existing theories about a specific subject matter.

In order to develop problematization as a methodology for generating research questions, two key questions need to be answered regarding assumptions. First, what *types* of assumptions are relevant to consider? Second, *how* can these assumptions be identified, articulated, and challenged in a way that is likely to lead to the development of an interesting theory? Highly relevant here is the growing body of work that has focused on "interestingness" in theory development. Although many theorists (e.g., Astley, 1985; Bartunek et al., 2006) have described how a theory can be made more interesting by challenging assumptions, Davis (1971) has discussed this most fully, developing an "index of the interesting." The index describes twelve different ways in which an audience's assumptions can be challenged; these are subsumed in two main categories. The first category (characterization of a single phenomenon) includes those cases in which we assume that a phenomenon is constituted in a particular way, but in reality it is not, or vice versa; for example, a phenomenon that many assume to be disorganized is, in fact, organized. The second category (relations among multiple phenomena) includes those instances in which we assume that there is a particular relation between multiple phenomena when there is not, or vice versa; for instance, phenomena that we assume to be correlated are, in reality, uncorrelated.

While Davis's index provides a comprehensive account of ways in which a theory can challenge an audience's assumptions, the index does not specify what types of assumptions can be problematized. It provides only a general definition of assumption in the form of "what seems to be X is in reality non-X, or what is accepted as X is actually non-X" (Davis, 1971: 313). In particular, such a general definition does not address how assumptions differ in both depth (Abbott, 2004; Schein, 1985) and scope (Gouldner, 1970), which are essential to understand when constructing research questions through problematization. Nor does the index provide any specific principles for how different types of assumptions can be identified, articulated, and challenged. Below we develop a typology of assumptions that specifies what types of assumptions are available for problematization when generating research questions, followed by an elaboration of a set of principles for how assumptions can be identified and problematized.

A Typology of Assumptions Open for Problematization

While there is a range of different assumptions within the scientific field, we find it productive to distinguish five broad sets of assumptions that differ in both depth and scope. These are in-house, root metaphor, paradigm, ideology, and field assumptions. This categorization is partly inspired by Morgan's (1980) differentiation between puzzle solving, root metaphors, and paradigms. The typology is also influenced by the paradigm debate where some authors claim to have an overview of various world views (paradigms), thereby indicating the significance of the wider arena held together by some overall ideas and assumptions (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). An interest in ideology assumptions proceeds from the observation that researchers' engagement in scientific fields like management is in no way neutral regarding human interests and political positioning (Habermas, 1972). The notion of field assumption is inspired by scholars who take a broader view of an academic area (e.g., Bourdieu, 1979; Foucault, 1972).

In-house assumptions exist within a particular school of thought in the sense that they are shared and accepted as unproblematic by its advocates. In-house assumptions differ from puzzle solving in that they refer to a set of ideas held by a theoretical school about a specific subject matter, whereas puzzle solving refers to the particular way of conducting research stipulated by that school. An example of in-house assumptions are trait theories within the rationalistic school, which typically conceptualizes leadership as a set of specific attributes, such as formal knowledge, skills, attitudes, and personal traits possessed by the individual leader (Yukl, 2006). If we were to question the trait theory assumption that leadership is defined less by the trait of the leader than by the social context, we would challenge an in-house assumption of leadership.

Root metaphor assumptions are associated with broader images of a particular subject matter (Morgan, 1980, 1997). Within management studies, for example, it is common to see organizations as "cultures" in terms of a unitary set of values and beliefs shared by organization members. However, at the root metaphor level (Smircich, 1983), authors have questioned assumptions around unity, uniqueness, and consensus, and they have emphasized differentiation, fragmentation, discontinuity, and ambiguity as key elements in culture (e.g., Martin, 2002; Martin & Meyerson, 1988).

The ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions that underlie a specific literature can be characterized as *paradigmatic assumptions* (cf. Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Kuhn, 1970). The challenge of such assumptions is often a central ingredient for generating interesting research questions. For example, by adopting an interpretive perspective on professional competence, Sandberg (2000) challenged the dualist ontology underlying the prevalent rationalistic school, which conceptualizes professional competence as consisting of two separate entities: a set of attributes possessed by the worker and a separate set of work activities. However, from an interpretive approach, competence does not consist of two separate entities; instead, person and work form an inseparable relation through the lived experience of work. Such a questioning enabled Sandberg to provide an alternative assumption ground and, based on that, to generate new research questions about professional competence.

Ideology assumptions include various political-, moral-, and gender-related assumptions held about the subject matter. Burawoy (1979), for example, suggested that researchers conducting studies of work should not proceed from the question "Why don't workers work harder?" and then investigate norms about a reasonable work performance; instead, they should ask, "Why do people work as hard as they do?" In a similar vein, Sievers (1986) challenged existing theories of motivation by suggesting that instead of asking how people can be motivated in organizations, they should ask why people need to be motivated at all if they experience their jobs as meaningful.

Field assumptions are a broader set of assumptions about a specific subject matter that are shared by several different schools of thought within a paradigm, and sometimes even across paradigms and disciplines. Simon's (1947) work on bounded rationality can perhaps be seen as a mild but successful identification and challenge of a field assumption. His challenge of the widely shared assumption that humans are rational decision makers, and the alternative assumption of bounded rationality, opened up a range of new and interesting research questions and theories. Field assumptions may also unite antagonistic schools, which, at one level, often present as different and even oppositional but, at a deeper level, share a set of assumptions about their particular field (cf. Bourdieu, 1979). For example, labor process theorists and poststructural-oriented critical management scholars agree that there is something called "management" and an ideology or discourse of managerialism, which should be critically addressed. However, in debates each of these schools of thought claims to have privileged access to an insightful understanding of management.

Taken together, the typology can be seen as a continuum of overlapping assumptions open for problematization, where in-house assumptions form one end and field assumptions the other end of the continuum. Challenging in-house assumptions can be seen as a minor form of problematization; questioning root metaphor assumptions as a more middle-range form; and challenging paradigm, ideology, and field assumptions as a broader and more fundamental form of problematization. It may seem that challenging any of the three latter types of assumptions is most likely to generate research questions that may lead to the development of more interesting and influential theories. However, a challenge of these broader assumptions may also be superficial, since it is difficult to achieve depth when addressing broad intellectual terrains. An insightful challenge of an in-house or a root metaphor assumption can be a key part in the process of developing new theory.

Methodological Principles for Identifying, Articulating, and Challenging Assumptions

As described above, a key task in generating research questions through problematization is to enter a dialectical interrogation between one's own and other metatheoretical stances so as to identify, articulate, and challenge central

assumptions underlying existing literature in a way that opens up new areas of inquiry. To be able to problematize assumptions through such an interrogation, the following methodological principles are central: (1) identifying a domain of literature, (2) identifying and articulating assumptions underlying this domain, (3) evaluating them, (4) developing an alternative assumption ground, (5) considering it in relation to its audience, and (6) evaluating the alternative assumption ground. While we, for the sake of clarity, present the principles in a sequential order, the actual problematization process is considerably more iterative than linear in character. Moreover, these principles should not be treated as a list of fixed ingredients in a recipe but, rather, as important elements to consider in the problematization process. As Deacon (2000) notes, problematization cannot be reduced to a mechanical or even strictly analytical procedure, since it always involves some kind of creative act. "It is a creation in the sense that, given a certain situation, one cannot infer that precisely this kind of problematization will follow" (2000: 135).

1. Identifying a domain of literature for assumption-challenging investigations. It is usually not obvious how to sort and delimit existing studies into a specific domain of literature and then relate that literature to one's own study (Locke & Golden-Biddle, 1997). This is the case irrespective of whether one is using gap-spotting or problematization. However, compared to gap-spotting research, problematization efforts are less concerned with covering all possible studies within a field than uncritically reproducing the assumptions informing these studies. Problematization research typically involves a more narrow literature coverage and in-depth readings of key texts, with the specific aim of identifying and challenging the assumptions underlying the specific literature domain targeted. In this sense, the prevailing norm to relate one's own study to all the relevant literature works against problematization and needs to be resisted. However, it is important to make broad references to major or typical studies and to scrutinize possible problematization in relevant work.

Two interrelated issues are important to consider when identifying a domain of literature for problematization: the actual domain targeted and the specific texts chosen for deep readings and rereadings. Identifying or constructing a domain of literature provides the entrance to picking some texts, but careful reading of these may inspire the revision of the literature domain that finally will be the research question target. One possibility is to focus on an exemplar—that is, a path-defining study (Abbott, 2001; Kuhn, 1970)—that plays a key role in a literature domain. Given the significance of path-defining studies, such a focus may be productive, although, of course, later work drawing on the path-defining study needs to be identified and reviewed in order to investigate whether all the assumptions that one finds potentially interesting to challenge are still in operation. Another option is to concentrate on one summary or a few authoritative summaries, given that they are not covering too much (which may mean that the clues to assumptions are too vague). A third option is to look at a few more recent, influential, and respected pieces, covering some variation in a particular domain of literature. Although these options need to be supplemented with broader readings, the in-depth reading of the selected texts is the focal point for the problematizer.

2. Identifying and articulating assumptions underlying the chosen domain of literature. Assumptions underlying a specific domain of literature are rarely formulated as McGregorian theory X versus theory Y alternatives. Such explicitly formulated assumptions have more the character of "postulations." As Gouldner notes, postulations "contain a second set of assumptions that are unpostulated and unlabeled . . . because they provide the background out of which the postulations in part emerge and . . . not being expressively formulated, they remain in the background of the theorist's attention" (1970: 29). It is the assumptions that mostly remain implicit or weakly articulated that are the main target in the problematization methodology. A key issue here is to transform what are commonly seen as truths or facts into assumptions.

Drawing on the assumption typology outlined above, we see a range of methodological tactics available for identifying assumptions in existing literature. In-house assumptions can be identified by scrutinizing internal debates and the interfaces between a specific group of authors who frequently refer to each other and neighboring areas, moderately relating one's work to the focused group's work, and mainly

using a similar narrative style and vocabulary. For example, various authors have challenged the idea that organizations typically form unitary and unique cultures (e.g., Van Maanen & Barley, 1984), or even clear and stable subcultures (Martin & Meyerson, 1988), by seeing culture as a process rather than as something stable (Alvesson, 2002).

Root metaphor assumptions can be explored by (1) identifying the basic image or metaphor of social reality informing a text or school and (2) detecting or producing alternative possible confrontational metaphors. Morgan's (1997) *Images of Organization* provides one well-known illustration of how metaphors can be used to become aware of alternative conceptualizations and, thus, how they can inspire one to articulate one's own assumptions. Alvesson (1993) picks up this line, arguing that it is possible to carve out assumptions by looking at the metaphors behind the metaphors used (i.e., second-level metaphors). For example, behind the metaphor that conceptualizes organization as a political arena, one could imagine different views of this arena, one being a parliamentary democracy (with rules of the game) and another being more like a jungle, where the political battles are less democratic and rule bound.

Identification of paradigm assumptions normally calls for some familiarity with an alternative world view, without being stuck in the latter. Some existing efforts to map and confront paradigms may be helpful (e.g., Astley & Van de Ven, 1983; Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Deetz, 1996; Donaldson, 1985; Pfeffer, 1982). Although reading about paradigm debates can be useful, the challenge is not to be caught up in them or by the positions expressed in those debates. Instead, they should be used as important heuristic tools to loosen up others' as well as our own views (Abbott, 2004: 86).

Ideological assumptions can also be explored by being aware of positions very different from the focal one in terms of interests, focus, identifications, values, and ethical commitments. One tactic would be to read and interpret an example of what appears to be positive and worth taking seriously as a problem to be addressed or as a solution to be embraced. Another tactic would be to view something negative (e.g., repressive) as perhaps innocent or even positive (e.g., laissez-faire leadership as a source of autonomy). Working with the recognition of a multitude of interests and values and the contradictions and dilemmas between these could also be beneficial. The contradiction between values like autonomy and leadership or managerial work as hierarchical control versus democratic accountability could exemplify this (Alvesson & Willmott, 1996).

Field assumptions are difficult to identify because "everyone" shares them, and, thus, they are rarely thematized in research texts. One option is to search across theoretical schools and intellectual camps to see whether they have anything in common regarding the conceptualization of the particular subject matter in question. Another option is to look at debates and critiques between seemingly very different positions and focus on what they are *not* addressing—that is, the common consensual ground not being debated. Looking at other fields may also be valuable in getting some perspective. This is to some extent illustrated in this article, since we identify and challenge gap-spotting as a field assumption for how to generate research questions within management studies (in this regard, we acknowledge help from Davis [1971], a scholar outside our field).

Although focusing on a specific type of assumption may be fruitful, it is often better to vary one's focus and, at least initially, consider what in-house, metaphor, paradigm, ideology, and field assumptions underlie a particular domain of existing literature. It is also important to focus on assumptions that may exist at different theoretical levels within a targeted study. This is because challenging an in-house assumption related to a broader theoretical perspective (e.g., functionalist perspective, etc.) within the targeted study may facilitate the formulation of more interesting research questions than challenging an in-house assumption underlying a specific theory (e.g., trait theory, etc.) within the study targeted. It should also be borne in mind that assumptions are not fixed but are, to some extent, an outcome of how one constructs the nature and scope of the domain of literature targeted, and this can be narrowed or broadened and can be interpreted in different ways. Hence, the combination of hermeneutical in-depth readings, creative efforts, some boldness, patience, self-critique, support from theoretical stances other than one's own, and sometimes even luck is important in order to identify and articulate assumptions.

3. Evaluating articulated assumptions. Having identified and articulated assumptions within the chosen literature domain, the problematizer needs to assess them. Certainly not all assumptions are worthy of being problematized and brought forward as significant research contributions—or as key steps in such an enterprise. The problematizer must therefore continually ask him/herself, "What is the theoretical potential of challenging a particular assumption?" As a general rule, challenging broader assumptions, such as paradigm or field assumptions, is likely to lead to greater impact theories, but these assumptions are often more difficult to identify and challenge successfully.

An overall but vague consideration for an identified assumption to be problematized should be that it does not contribute significantly to a "good" understanding of the subject matter but is still broadly shared within a research area. "Truth" in any of the several available senses is also an important criterion to consider—that is, an assumption that is seen as "untrue" is then targeted. Empirical evidence indicating that some assumptions are problematic is important here, even though assumptions seldom can be directly empirically investigated or tested (Astley, 1985; Kuhn, 1970).

Something true can also be trivial, and a strong insistence on proving that something is true (where a hypothesis should be verified) can be constraining (Becker, 1998: 20-24; Starbuck, 2006: 99–101). Theoretical fruitfulness, novelty, and provocative capacity can be equally important to bear in mind—and are typically what makes a theory interesting (Astley, 1985). A closely related criterion is to what extent a challenge of the identified assumptions can inspire new areas of research and research programs. The articulated assumptions may also be assessed in terms of how they form the basis for other established knowledge areas or a dominant line of thinking that tends to produce mainstream effects (e.g., close alternatives).

"Timing" is another consideration. An assumption may be productive and inspiring at a specific time but may gradually become part of conventional wisdom and lose its power to generate new knowledge. Many critical perspectives (poststructuralism, critical management studies, feminism, etc.) may, for example, be able to inspire problematization for some time but may later establish a new set of unchallenged assumptions—a source of application rather than drivers for rethinking. Problematizing such assumptions may then be necessary, either through informed defenses of the problematized positions (e.g., Donaldson, 1985) or through new or synthesized approaches like skeptical partial affirmation (e.g., Newton, 1998).

4. Developing an alternative assumption ground. While the formulation of alternative assumptions analytically marks a crucial "stage" in problematization, it should not be seen as isolated from the other principles involved. The (re)formulation part extends the earlier parts of the process: identifying assumptions calls for at least an intuitive idea of alternative assumptions, and success in the former means that the latter is likely to come through more clearly.

Similar to identifying and articulating existing assumptions, it can be useful to consult available critical and reflexive literature, representatives of competing schools, and various forms of heuristic tools, such as those offered by Abbott (2004: 110–210), in developing new assumptions. As emphasized above, a challenge of existing assumptions should include some independence from these and should move beyond already available counterassumptions. It may, for example, be tempting to use an interpretive stance against functionalist assumptions, or to replace interpretive humanism with poststructuralism, but the purpose of this approach is to avoid such moves. Producing new and good research questions means that there are no predefined answers available; new questions offer starting points for new answers. Such a problematization is facilitated by temporarily applying the dialectical interrogation between different theoretical stances and the domain of literature targeted. The idea is to be inspired by various theoretical stances and their resources and to use them creatively in order to come up with something unexpected and novel.

5. Considering assumptions in relation to the audience. Assumptions to be targeted for challenge must be considered in relation to the groups who hold them and the general intellectual, social, and political situation of a research community. It is a complex issue because the "audience" typically is not a unitary group—primarily because there are often not one but multiple audiences, and the assumptions held by one audience may differ from the assumptions held by another audience. It is also likely

that one particular audience consists of several subgroups, which makes it even harder to specify the potentially relevant audiences. For instance, within a specific area, such as strategy or leadership, there is an ambiguous mass of overlapping groups, which are difficult to separate into clear segments. Layperson audiences may be even harder to identify and delimit since they are usually not as well documented as academic audiences. One option could be to review more popular business magazines that practitioners read and perhaps also write for. Apart from literature reviews, it is also important to talk and listen to both academics and practitioners in order to understand their views of the particular subject matter in question and the assumptions they hold about it. Sometimes this leads to revisions of the literature domain one started with.

It is important as well to recognize the politics involved when choosing the assumptions to be challenged. It is not only a matter of advancing science but of understanding research politics—who will lose or win when a specific assumption is challenged? Similarly, what type of challenge can an audience accept cognitively and emotionally? In other words, how can assumptions be challenged without upsetting dominant groups, which hold them so strongly that they ignore the critique or even prevent one's study from being published? Here problematization of in-house and root metaphor assumptions probably will often be received more positively (less defensively) than problematization of ideology, paradigm, or field assumptions.

6. Evaluating the alternative assumption ground. Following the body of work focusing on interestingness in theory development (e.g., Bartunek et al., 2006; Davis, 1971; McKinley et al., 1999), the ultimate indicator of whether a problematization is going to be successful is not so much rigor and empirical support—although these qualities are part of the picture (since credibility is always important)—as it is the experience of "this is interesting." Davis (1971) suggests three responses that can be used to evaluate to what extent an alternative assumption ground is likely to generate a theory that will be regarded as interesting.

That's obvious! If the set of alternative assumptions to a large extent confirms the assumptions held by the targeted audiences—what they already assume to be the case about the subject matter—it will be regarded as obvious by many.

It's absurd! If, however, the alternative assumption ground denies all the assumptions held by the targeted audiences, it is likely that it will be regarded as unbelievable. Both of the above responses indicate that the alternative assumption ground is likely to be unsuccessful.

That's interesting! This is the ideal response. According to Davis and other advocates of "interesting theories" (e.g., Bartunek et al., 2006; McKinley et al., 1999; Weick, 1989), the experience of "this is interesting" occurs when the alternative assumption ground accepts some and denies some of the assumptions held by the targeted audiences. Because they are curious and willing to listen, the audiences may take the new idea or challenge seriously. Hence, the litmus test for being considered interesting is that the alternative assumption ground should fall somewhere between what is regarded as obvious and absurd.

One could add to the intellectual response revolving around novelty, surprise, and excitement (Abbott, 2004) that it is important to consider the perceived fruitfulness or relevance of the new research question for developing new research programs and for contributing new knowledge having social relevance (Van de Ven, 2007). It is also important to consider its rhetorical appeal (Golden-Biddle & Locke, 2007). A commonly used rhetorical strategy is politeness (Locke & Golden-Biddle, 1997; Myers, 1993). For instance, all the authors in the texts investigated by Locke and Golden-Biddle (1997) used various politeness strategies (such as acknowledging other researchers for their contribution to the field) to reduce the risk of upsetting the academics they were criticizing. Similarly, the aesthetic dimensions of the alternative assumption ground are also central in composing an appealing and convincing argument (Astley, 1985). For instance, to achieve the response of "that's interesting," it is important to work with metaphors that are appealing and concepts and formulations that are challenging and provocative. Examples could be March and Olsen's (1976) garbage can model of decision making and Brunsson's (2003) idea of organized hypocrisy. It is important as well to test the alternative assumption ground on various representatives from the targeted audiences. How do they react?

The outlined problematization methodology is summarized in Figure 1 and further elaborated in the next section by applying it to the literature domain of identity constructions in organizations. Again, while the actual problematization process is considerably more organic, for illustrative purposes we follow the six problematization principles outlined above sequentially.

AN ILLUSTRATION OF THE PROBLEMATIZATION METHODOLOGY

1. Identifying a Domain of Literature for Assumption-Challenging Investigations

In order to illustrate our problematization methodology, we choose to focus primarily on Dutton et al.'s (1994) path-setting study, "Organizational Images and Member Identification," within the domain of identity constructions in organizations. Although focusing on a key text offers a good opportunity for in-depth exploration of assumptions, it can also lead to limited results. Therefore, in order to accomplish a broader relevance, we also consider a few other influential studies in the domain with a somewhat different approach (i.e., Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Gioia, Schulz, & Corley, 2000; Pratt, 2000; Pratt & Foreman, 2000). There is also a wealth of other studies that, to various degrees, are relevant in problematizing Dutton's et al.'s text (e.g., Alvesson, Ashcraft, & Thomas, 2008; Brown, 2006; Collinson, 2003; Deetz, 1992; Elsbach, 1999; Foucault, 1977, 1980; Haslam, 2004; Jenkins, 2000; Knights & Willmott, 1989; Shotter & Gergen, 1989; Weedon, 1987). However, in order to focus on the elements in the problematization methodology, with the exception of a few occasions, we avoid looking into how others have raised points of relevance for discussing the various issues that we address in our problematization of Dutton et al.'s text below.

FIGURE 1
The Problematization Methodology and Its Key Elements

Aim of the problematization methodology
Generating novel research questions through a dialectical interrogation of one's own familiar position, other stances, and the literature domain targeted for assumption challenging

A typology of assumptions open for problematization				
In-house: Assumptions that exist within a specific school of thought	*Root metaphor:* Broader images of a particular subject matter underlying existing literature	*Paradigm:* Ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions underlying existing literature	*Ideology:* Political-, moral-, and gender-related assumptions underlying existing literature	*Field:* Assumptions about a specific subject matter that are shared across different theoretical schools

Principles for identifying and challenging assumptions					
1. Identify a domain of literature: What main bodies of literature and key texts make up the domain?	*2. Identify and articulate assumptions:* What major assumptions underlie the literature within the identified domain?	*3. Evaluate articulated assumptions:* Are the identified assumptions worthy to be challenged?	*4. Develop alternative assumptions:* What alternative assumptions can be developed?	*5. Relate assumptions to audience:* What major audiences hold the challenged assumptions?	*6. Evaluate alternative assumptions:* Are the alternative assumptions likely to generate a theory that will be regarded as interesting by the audiences targeted?

The particular subject matter in Dutton et al.'s study is how individuals are attached to social groups, which they conceptualize as "member identification." They explain it as follows:

> Members vary in how much they identify with their work organization. When they identify strongly with the organization, the attributes they use to define the organization also define them. Organizations affect their members through this identification process, as shown by the comments of a 3M salesman, quoted in Garbett (1988: 2): "I found out today that it is a lot easer being a salesman for 3M than for a little jobber no one has ever heard of. When you don't have to waste time justifying your existence or explaining why you are here, it gives you a certain amount of self-assurance. And I discovered I came across warmer and friendlier. It made me feel good and enthusiastic to be 'somebody for a change.'" This salesman attributes his new, more positive sense of self to his membership in 3M, a well-known company. What he thinks about his organization and what he suspects others think about his organization affects the way that he thinks about himself as a salesperson (Dutton et al., 1994: 239).

Dutton et al. try to understand member identification by investigating how "a member's cognitive connection with his or her work organization . . . [derives] from images that each member has of the organization" (1994: 239). The first image (what the member believes is distinctive, central, and enduring about the organization) is defined as perceived organizational identity. The second image (what the member believes outsiders think about the organization) is called "the construed external image" (1994: 239). Dutton et al. develop a model of member identification that suggests that the two organizational images "influence the cognitive connection that members create with their organization and the kind of behaviors that follow" (1994: 239). Their model proposes that "members assess the attractiveness of these images by how well the image preserves the continuity of their self-concept, provides distinctiveness, and enhances self-esteem" (1994: 239). Based on the model, they develop a range of propositions about organizational identification. These can be tested, but we here look at the assumptions behind the propositions.

2. Identifying and Articulating Assumptions Underlying the Chosen Domain of Literature

Although Dutton et al. point out explicitly that a central assumption of their study is that people's sense of membership in an organization shapes their self-concept, very few assumptions on which they base their argument are highlighted in this way. Instead, the text creates the impression that its argument and logic are grounded in specific factors reflecting self-evident truths. For example, the authors claim that a perceived organizational identity exists in the sense of a member's having beliefs about the distinctive, central, and enduring attributes of the organization (reflecting Albert and Whetten's [1985] definition), and that an organizational member sometimes defines him/herself by the same attributes that he or she believes define the organization. But these statements contain assumptions that conceptualize their subject matter of how individuals are attached to organizations in a particular way and are not necessarily correct or productive.

Let us first consider the statement "a member's beliefs about the distinctive, central, and enduring attributes of the organization" (1994: 239). One of its assumptions is that people see themselves as members of an organization, as if the latter is like a club or an association, which people join as a positive choice. Another is that members have (1) beliefs (2) about attributes of the organization and (3) that these attributes are distinctive, central, and enduring. Similarly, the statement "the degree to which a member defines him- or herself by the same attributes that he or she believes define the organization" (1994: 239) is also underpinned by a range of assumptions. One is that individuals and organizations are constituted by a set of inherent and more or less stable attributes. Another is that the attributes of the individual are comparable with the attributes of the organization through a member's cognitive connection. Based on those assumptions, Dutton et al. conceptualize person and organization as externally related to each other through an individual's images of his or her organization and what outsiders think about the organization. This reasoning carries a range of paradigmatic assumptions, such as the dualist ontological assumption that a person and the world exist independently of each other (Sandberg & Targama, 2007: Chapter 2).

Let us briefly compare the Dutton et al. text with the other selected texts in the domain. Pratt, drawing heavily on Dutton et al., investigated "how organizations attempt, succeed, and fail to change how members view themselves in

relation to the organization" (2000: 457). His work departs from the emphasis in the literature that "most research [should] focus on how organizations successfully engender strong ties with members" and instead should "look at organizational conditions that lead to positive, negative, ambivalent and broken identifications" (2000: 457), and at how identification management is "associated with a variety of identification types" (2000: 458).

While sharing similar assumptions as Dutton et al., Pratt adds to the literature by pointing out that the individual can change identification states. His claim resonates to some extent with Ashforth's claim that "identity is perpetual work in progress" (1998: 213), further underscored by Ashforth and Mael's observation of "the often unique and context-specific demands of an identity" (1989: 147). In a similar vein, Gioia et al. argue that the "apparent durability of identity is somewhat illusory" (2000: 64), because it is mainly a matter of "the stability used by organization members to express what they believe the organization to be" (2000: 64). Hence, while still sharing Dutton et al.'s assumptions that organizational member identification is a "distinctive and enduring characteristic" (Ashforth & Mael, 1989: 154), the above authors express a more dynamic and less organization-focused view of organizational identification.

The assumptions held by Dutton et al. (and to a significant degree also by Ashforth & Mael, Gioia et al., and Pratt) can be further elaborated and articulated with the help of the assumptions typology. For example, their assumption that members may have beliefs about the specific attributes of the organization can be regarded as an in-house assumption among these authors. The assumption that individuals are carriers of beliefs can also be targeted at a paradigmatic level. The "natural" and potentially harmonious relationship between individuals and the (human-like) organization indicated by the overlap of characteristics can be further explored in terms of ideology. The very idea that there is something—constructed or not—such as "organizational identity" or "individual identity" and that they are worthy of investigation may indicate some field-level assumptions.

3. Evaluating Articulated Assumptions

The assumptions identified above (on membership, fixed perceptions of the individual and the organization as a thing-like phenomenon, and a perceived similarity between individual and organizational attributes) need to be assessed to determine if, and to what extent, they are worthy of further problematizations. For example, the assumption that people regard themselves as members of their work organizations can be challenged with the more instrumental and often darker aspects of employment. One can thus question Dutton et al.'s ideological assumption of an "organizational man" view of a positive and strong link between an employer and a compliant employee with a limited independent self, using the employment situation as a natural and significant source of identity. Pratt's (2000) work opens this up to some extent by pointing out less positive identifications, but it still adheres to the assumption that "members view themselves in relation to the organization" and that issues around identity "can and should be managed" (Pratt & Foreman, 2000: 18).

The assumption that members have (1) beliefs (2) about attributes of the organization and (3) that these attributes are distinctive, central, and enduring can also be further questioned. Are people's ways of relating to organizations typically so thing-like? Using an alternative metaphor, the organization can perhaps be seen as a broad and complex terrain where perceptions and sentiments are shifting, depending on aspects, moments, and contexts. For example, "organization" may sometimes refer to colleagues or to top management; at other times to one's own department or work or one's future career prospects, rewards, and fringe benefits; and, on other occasions, to mass medial representations, products, and HR policies. As Ashcraft and Alvesson (2009) show, people construct and relate to a seemingly straightforward object like "management" in highly shifting and varied ways. As an identification target, "the organization" may be best conceived as multiple and moving. This is also to some extent pointed out by Gioia et al. (2000) and Pratt and Foreman (2000), but these authors still assume the existence of beliefs about the organization as a whole (and its central, distinct, and enduring characteristics), while a counterassumption

could be that such an entity is not what most people primarily relate to.

The assumption that individuals and organizations hold similar attributes and generate a "fit" appears to be as problematic and can be further questioned. The possible connection may be considerably more frictional, volatile, and fluid. Ideas of varied identification types (Pratt, 2000), pluralistic beliefs about organizational identity (Pratt & Foreman, 2000), and identity changes reflecting image changes (Gioia et al., 2000) are also relevant to consider here, since they give some clues about what assumptions are worthwhile to problematize further.

4. Developing an Alternative Assumption Ground

We now arrive at the task of developing assumptions counter, or at least alternative, to the ones identified and articulated through the problematization above. Similar to the identification and articulation of the above assumptions, we can here draw on different theoretical positions to play up reference points and resources for problematization. One possible stance is critical theory, which provides at least two alternative assumptions. One proposes that the organizational membership assumption is a naive idealization of contemporary work experiences in flexible capitalism, strongly downplaying lasting relationships and commitment (Sennett, 1998) and thereby making organizational identification a rare or fragile phenomenon—perhaps a managerial dream rather than something existing on a broader scale. Another and quite different critical theory assumption is that the possibility of strong identification with the organization may mean people become cultural dopes and lose a clear sense of independence in relation to the employer, who wins the minds and hearts of employees (Kunda, 1992; Willmott, 1993).

A quite different route would be to proceed from the economic man assumption about rational maximization of self-interest (Camerer & Fehr, 2006; Henrich et al., 2005), leading to a view of identification as a tactical resource for self-promotion. A third alternative would be to be influenced by a poststructuralist stance, in which the assumption of the organization as a fixed and one-dimensional object can be challenged by a hyperprocess or fluidity view of organizations as multidimensional, shape shifting, and discursively constituted—a domain exhibiting multiple and varied social identities (Chia, 2000). This assumption is different from positions mainly pointing out changes over time (as expressed, for example, by Gioia et al., 2000, and Pratt, 2000).

The above problematizations, associated with (two versions of) critical theory, economic man thinking, and radical process thinking, offer reference points for alternative assumptions. We selectively use all in order to develop novel research questions. As emphasized, problematization is best accomplished through using (but not directly applying) a broad set of theoretical stances, offering resources for unpacking and rethinking.

The assumption that postulates a stable and robust degree of perceived similarity between individual and organization could be related to ideas on variation, process, and dynamics around self-definition and construction of the organization. The possible *meeting points*—spaces for establishing a possible "perceived similarity"—may be rare, since most parts of people's working lives may go on without them comparing themselves to the employing organization at a more abstract and holistic level. Still, these meeting points may be important. Rather than seeing the similarity between individual and organization as static (or only gradually dynamic, as Pratt and Gioia et al. do), one can regard organization and individual as different *traffic of stories* (of self and organization), and sometimes these stories may converge—that is, organizational identification temporarily occurs.

One possibility here could be that employees articulate a positive link between themselves and their organizations when the context implies certain advantages but not when it implies disadvantages. Identification is, thus, self-interest driven, a discursive act and typically temporal and situation specific, sometimes opportunistic. The citation of the 3M employee by Dutton et al. above illustrates this. Since it can be an advantage to be a representative of a large and well-known firm in a certain sale situation, making presentation easier, a positive link between individual and organization is emphasized in that situation. Whether the same positive link—and identification—is expressed when corporate bureaucracy or hierarchy (often

mentioned as negative aspects of very large firms), or the possible harsh performance pressure from management, provides the context is perhaps more doubtful. Possible identifications may therefore be more area specific and dynamic, existing in a space that also includes salient moments of alienation or opportunism. Research questions on the perceived unity or multicontextuality of an organization (*if* that category is relevant for people) and how individuals may couple/decouple themselves at various times and in various domains (settings) may then be suggested.

Let us sum up alternative assumptions and research questions. First, people working in organizations more commonly see themselves as employees with varying degrees of experiences of organizational membership. An employee's way of defining him/herself may be more or less congruent, nonrelated to or antagonistic to meanings used to portray and refer to the organization. Do people see a similarity between themselves and their organization, and if so, how often and when? Perhaps the (rare?) situations where statements of self and organization seem to be related can be explored as situation-specific construction processes, offering sites for identity work.

Second, employees do not necessarily have fixed or enduring beliefs only slowly changing over time as an effect of radically new circumstances, as proposed by Gioia et al. (2000) and Pratt (2000). Instead, employees take temporary positions on their organizational affiliation, such as variation in feelings about membership, being part of an employment contract, and being subordinated to an organizational structure. Perhaps situation, event, and process matter more than static or enduring images about attributes? Do people have/express consistent and united or shifting and fragmented beliefs/images about self and organization? One can here imagine a garbage can–like situation, where the individual and various social identities and identification options (organizational but also group, occupational, ethnic, gender, and age) plus various subject positions (e.g., opportunism, alienation, sense of belonging) are in circulation and sometimes come together in a variety of combinations. Occasionally, a positive construction of organizational identity becomes linked to a positive self-conception through identification, but perhaps this is a temporal, fragile, and possibly rare position rather than a fixed trait?

5. Considering Assumptions in Relation to the Audience

The four previous principles indicate reasons to reconsider some of the assumptions underlying not only Dutton et al.'s approach but also broader parts of the organizational identity and identification domain. A key assumption in this large and expanding literature domain (Haslam & Reicher, 2006) is that most employees define themselves as organizational members, or they may, given proper (identity) management, do so. This can, of course, motivate various forms of problematization—from a strong (paradigmatic) one, aiming at undermining the key belief that people define themselves partly or mainly through belonging to an organization (in terms of central, distinctive, and enduring traits), as indicated by the organizational identity and identification industry, to milder ones, suggesting revisions through more limited (in-house) problematizations.

On the one hand, given the heavy investments and the structuring of organization studies partly around identity as a key subfield and a key variable, a strong problematization case may be seen as irrelevant (absurd) and become marginalized. On the other hand, a radical challenge of conventional identity research may be applauded by various groups that hold more process-sensitive social constructionist assumptions about identification, although they may not regard it as particularly novel. However, being taken seriously by the majority of management scholars and practitioners probably implies a less extreme version than that favored by poststructuralists, which we think our alternative assumption ground expresses. Also, within the group whose assumptions are challenged, a variety of responses can be expected. Some of these will no doubt be political, since researchers have vested interests in and identify with their theories (Bourdieu, 2004; Bresleau, 1997).

6. Evaluating the Alternative Assumption Ground

The main task of the sixth problematization principle is to assess to what extent the alternative assumption ground can lead to new re-

search questions that have the potential to generate more interesting identity theories. A first step in such an evaluation is to further explore which major audiences are related to the identity field within organization theory and, perhaps, also more broadly in the social sciences. While it is not possible to do so in this article, a review of existing literature on identity in organizations would be central for identifying major audience segments, since it would offer material for how to fine-tune the message. Even without reviewing existing literature in detail, an important audience in our example is likely to be those who broadly share (consciously or unconsciously) the cognitive psychology perspective on which Dutton et al.'s work is based, together with those favoring a view of the world made up by perceptions of stable entities.

When the major audiences are known, we are in a position to use the criteria suggested by Davis: will they regard the alternative assumption ground as absurd, irrelevant, or interesting and promising? Although the alternative assumption ground suggests that individuals' identification with organizations is far more weak (or even nonexisting), fluid, and volatile than assumed by Dutton et al. (and, on the whole, by many other influential organizational identification researchers as well), it does not strongly question the conceptualization of the subject matter, member identification, as such. Nor does the alternative set of assumptions provide a deliberate ground attack on the paradigmatic assumptions underlying the cognitive perspective adopted by Dutton et al. It is therefore possible that the alternative set of assumptions will be found as potentially interesting by many of the audiences addressing organizational identity and identification from a functionalist view.

The extent to which more radical social constructionist audiences will find our alternative assumptions interesting is questionable, since they already embrace some of them. If they were targeted, the task would be to avoid the "that's obvious" response, perhaps by emphasizing the continuation and development of a particular line of thought (not in itself targeted for problematization). For this audience the problematization of a quite different set of assumptions than those of the Dutton et al. text is relevant.

If the alternative assumption ground is likely to be regarded as interesting by our targeted audiences, we are in a position to leave the problematization process and begin to formulate new research questions. For example, do employees construct/perceive their employing organizations in stable ways? And, if so, when and in what ways, if any, would the personal meaning be related to (varieties of) self-identity of these possible constructions/perceptions? One could possibly sharpen this question further. Rather than assuming that employees are members with clear and, over at least a short time period, fixed beliefs about organizational distinctiveness and endurance, one could proceed from the idea that they are (normally) not best conceptualized as members and could study *if, when, why,* and *how* people construct themselves as members having fixed beliefs about their employing organizations in relationship to themselves. The study of the circulation of self and organizational representations/identity possibilities and garbage can–like connections and disconnections could be an interesting research task. For example, do people move and, if so, how—between identification as a positive and a negative source of social identity—and to what extent are such moves driven by calculative and exploitative motives and experience of skeptical distancing (deidentification)?

Studying how employees arrive at and maintain beliefs that their organizations have traits that are distinctive, central, and enduring could also be a good research task. Being able to produce a coherent set of such beliefs would not be seen as unproblematic and typical but as a true accomplishment, facilitated by an ability to block out the changing, ambiguous, and fragmented nature of contemporary organizational life. Assuming a fluid and nonreified nature of social reality, organizational identity and self-identity, as well as alignment constructions ("I am similar to my organization"), could be viewed as defragmentation and deprocessualization of organizational life, countering the multiple and moving constructions of the themes included. Interesting, problematization-based research questions would then be as follows. Do people stabilize themes like organization and self and organizational/self-identification? What are the (rare) conditions and operations under which experiences of self and organization can be cognitively frozen and symbolically merged? Alternatively expressed,

when and how do positive stories of self and organization happily merge? The production of organizational identity as a topic and the more or less taken-for-granted phenomenon of such identification are then placed in a dynamic and fluid context. And the specific construction processes involved are then opened up for inquiry.

Would the above-generated research questions lead to more interesting and influential research than a study building positively on Dutton et al.? There are no guarantees, but if all the research on this topic is right (e.g., Astley, 1985; Bartunek et al., 2006; Black, 2000; Daft et al., 1987; Davis, 1971, 1986, 1999; Hargens, 2000; Weick, 1989, 2001), one could expect that the research questions generated through the problematization of assumptions underlying Dutton et al.'s approach are more likely to lead to an interesting theory than the use of a gap-spotting strategy to identify or create a gap in their approach that needs to be filled.

When and Why Problematization in Generating Research Questions?

Given its potential to generate more interesting theories, it may be tempting to advocate the problematization methodology as *the key* ingredient in formulating research questions. There are, however, often good reasons to also consider various forms of gap-spotting routes, such as supplementing and enriching other studies and clarifying issues where there are diverse opinions and incoherent results. Sometimes empirical findings play a major role in the formulation of the purpose of a study, such as in cases when one (re)formulates the research task quite late in the process (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007). Combinations of various elements/tactics for selectively building upon and partially problematizing established literature by challenging its underlying assumptions are probably more productive than "purist" approaches. We may also remind ourselves of the risk of perpetual problematization—overproblematization—leading to a sense of fatigue and a deficit of positive results, as in the case of postmodernism (e.g., deconstruction and partly critical theory). There is a problem if more energy goes into challenging assumptions than into working out and refining or testing well-founded and productive ideas. Having said this, given the strong mainstream tradition of identifying or constructing gaps in existing literature with the aim of filling them, we think there is considerable room for an increased use of problematization as a methodology for constructing novel research questions that can lead to the development of more interesting and influential theories within management studies.

The proposed methodology seems particularly relevant in situations of political domination and cognitive closure that easily follow from a dominant and established tradition. The *political* situation refers to cases where a social interest bias and/or political factors govern knowledge production rather than good ideas. But also the domination of a particular school of thought can stifle new ideas and call for politically motivated problematizations. The situation of *cognitive* closure is especially salient in research areas where a particular world view has colonized the researchers. In such situations there is often limited critical debate and there are few counterideas because deviant voices are silenced and people have to come up with alternative views. It seems particularly important to avoid a gap-spotting, extend-the-literature logic here. The benefits of rejuvenating the field may be high, although the task is not an easy one.

CONCLUSION

This study makes two interrelated contributions to theory development within the management field. First is the identification and demonstration of how gap-spotting as the prevalent way of constructing research questions from existing literature leads to a shortage of really interesting and influential studies within management science. In the vocabulary developed in this study, the prevalence of gap-spotting across intellectual traditions suggests that it constitutes a field assumption within management studies. It provides researchers with a shared, and to a large extent taken-for-granted, norm for generating research questions from existing theory (at least as it is presented in published texts, guiding the actual research contribution). However, while gap-spotting plays a significant role in developing existing management literature, it reinforces rather than challenges the assumptions underlying established theories and, thus, actually reduces the chances of producing really interesting theories. Our

identification and articulation of gap-spotting as a field assumption within management can therefore be seen as an important contribution in itself. It offers a strong signal to the field that the grip of gap-spotting as *the* main way of constructing research questions needs to be loosened. At the same time, it encourages researchers to go beyond the logic of gap-spotting and to work with alternative ways of generating research questions that may lead to the development of more interesting theories.

Second, and the main contribution of this study, is the proposed problematization methodology, which provides a comprehensive and systematic addition to gap-spotting and prepackaged problematization. Instead of providing different strategies for identifying or constructing gaps in existing literature (and then filling them) or a prepackaged problematization to challenge the assumptions of others, this methodology enables us—through a dialectical interrogation of our own familiar position, other theoretical stances, and the literature domain targeted—to identify, articulate, and challenge different types of assumptions underlying existing literature and, based on that, to formulate research questions that may facilitate the development of more interesting and influential theories.

It does so in two ways. First, it offers specific heuristic support for identifying and challenging assumptions in existing literature through its typology, consisting of five broad types of assumptions: in-house, root metaphor, paradigm, ideology, and field assumptions. Second, it provides a set of specific principles for how assumptions in existing theory can be problematized and, based on that, can generate novel research questions: (1) identifying a domain of literature for assumption-challenging investigations; (2) identifying and articulating the assumptions (in-house, root metaphor, paradigm, ideology, and field assumptions) underpinning existing theory as clearly as possible; (3) assessing them, pointing at shortcomings, problems, and oversights; (4) developing new assumptions and formulating research questions; (5) relating the alternative assumption ground to an identified audience and assessing the audience's potential resistance and responsiveness to it; and (6) evaluating whether the alternative assumptions are likely to generate a theory that will be seen as interesting and crafting the alternative line of inquiry in a dialogic form to increase the likelihood that readers will respond positively to it.

It is important to emphasize that the proposed methodology in itself does not guarantee a successful problematization outcome. A whole range of other factors, such as creativity, imagination, reflexivity, range of knowledge mastered, and a broad understanding of different metatheoretical standpoints, is also critical. However, taken together, the methodology presented here offers a systematic approach for generating more novel research questions through problematization of existing literature.

An important inspiration for this paper was Davis's (1971) seminal insight that challenging assumptions is what makes a theory interesting, elaborated in his "index of the interesting." Our problematization methodology extends and goes beyond Davis's index in two significant ways: (1) compared to Davis's general definition of assumption ("We thought it was X but it is really Y"), the typology of assumptions elaborated within the problematization methodology provides a more nuanced and enriched specification of what types of assumptions are available for problematization, and (2) in contrast to Davis, the methodology offers a set of specific principles for how to identify, articulate, and challenge assumptions underlying existing literature and, based on that, to construct interesting and novel research questions.

More generally, the problematization methodology also contributes to more reflective scholarship in the sense that it counteracts or supplements the domination of gap-spotting as a research ideal. As a methodology, it encourages us to produce more novel research questions and theories by actively questioning and critically scrutinizing established knowledge in academia and in society at large. It does so by offering a distinct alternative to the dominant mode of using the literature in a field for formulating research questions. Given the current shortage of interesting and influential theories in management studies, the proposed problematization methodology seems much needed.

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Mats Alvesson (mats.alvesson@fek.lu.se) is professor of business administration at the University of Lund and the University of Queensland Business School. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Lund. His research interests include critical theory, gender, power, professional services firms, organizational culture, leadership, identity, organizational image, qualitative methods, and philosophy of science.

Jörgen Sandberg (j.sandberg@business.uq.edu.au) is a reader in management in the School of Business at the University of Queensland and leads its research program, Knowledge in Organizations. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Gothenburg. His research interests include competence and learning in organizations, leadership, practice-based theories, qualitative research methods, and the philosophical underpinnings of organizational research.