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COMMENTARY

Challenging assumptions in research and practice using problematization principles

Rick Laguerre

Montclair State University, Montclair, NJ, USA
Email: laguerrer@montclair.edu

Hyland (2023) called for our field to question assumptions and explore new ideas, suggesting a need for I-O psychologists to challenge paradigms in our field through a reflexive process. Paradigm shifts, however, can take decades to occur and often they are a culmination of successive approximations toward that goal (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011; Hyland, 2023). Therefore, the purpose of this commentary is to provide strategies for incrementally challenging assumptions in our field, specifically, those that occur in research studies and practice environments. These strategies are guided by problematization principles for generating research questions (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011, 2020), which is a method of inductive reasoning that is highly reflexive. Specifically, the problematization method encourages scholars to evaluate the underlying assumptions of our constructs and dominant theories and consider ways that alternative theoretical perspectives may challenge the prevailing school of thought (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011, 2020). Hyland (2023) states that "our field does not have a robust body of literature or set of established practices for engaging in introspection and scientific self-examination" (p. 104); therefore, this commentary aims to serve as an initial blueprint for systematically engaging in reflexive processes in research studies and practice settings.

In what follows, I highlight the problematization approach for generating research questions that challenge assumptions in our field. Then, I provide concrete examples of this approach in research and offer suggestions for using its principles in practice.

The problematization-based method for challenging assumptions

The goal of the problematization methodology is to generate research questions through challenging assumptions (or commonly held beliefs) within theories and different schools of thought (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011, 2020). This can be accomplished through reflection (i.e., analyzing personal biases and the limitations inherent to one's own work) and through critically analyzing assumptions in published work. Problematization begins with identifying the scope of the assumption a researcher aims to challenge. For example, (a) a challenge that is *narrow* in scope may question commonly held beliefs among a subgroup of researchers, (b) a challenge that is *moderate* in scope questions commonly held beliefs across groups of researchers that have different areas of emphasis but those who ultimately agree on some common principles, and (c) a *broad* challenge questions an assumption that spans across many literary domains or disciplines (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011). Broad (i.e., cross-disciplinary) challenges are the most difficult to prove; therefore, organizational scholars should focus on challenges that are *narrow* or *moderate* in scope if they hope to make contributions that will, ultimately, lead to a paradigm shift in our field (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011). It is important to highlight that the problematization approach is best suited for an I-O psychologist looking to "shake things up," as opposed to one

who desires to reinforce the status quo—a dilemma that Hyland (2023) recognizes as one on which each I-O psychologist should reflect.

Once a *narrow* or *moderate* literary domain is identified, the problematization process continues by having the researcher identify assumptions surrounding constructs and theory, articulating their limitations, and presenting alternative sets of assumptions from which to derive research questions (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011, 2020). This is an iterative process that involves not only critiquing what has been published but also recognizing that all knowledge is not contained within these publications (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2020)—aligning with post-positivistic and social constructionist perspectives (Hyland, 2023).

Applying problematization principles in research: Leveraging theory

One example of the problematization method could be found in Avlesson and Sandberg's (2011) article on the topic. For instance, they used critical theory to challenge the assumption that organizations have central, distinct, and enduring characteristics by noting that the referent of what an "organization" is can vary depending on the employee and the timing of when an employee thinks of an organization. Specifically, employees may consider *their* organization to be something different—such as a department, a set of colleagues, their management, or human resource (HR) policies—depending on the context (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011). This opens up research questions surrounding why employees may refer to different aspects of an organization at different times (taking temporary positions) and other questions around whether organizational scholars, as a whole, should conceptualize the "organization" differently (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011). The problematization example provided by Alvesson and Sandberg (2011) is an illustration of a challenge that is *narrow* in scope but one that has the potential to be *moderate* in scope, depending on the line of inquiry.

Another study that illustrates problematization principles is one by Zacher and Rudolph (2019). For instance, Zacher and Rudolph (2019) used core self-evaluations theory and the life-span developmental theory of control to challenge the assumption that subjective age (a personal appraisal of how old one feels) was distinct from a fundamental appraisal of one's overall self-worth—core self-evaluations. They found support for their challenge, which resulted in debate about the measurement and utility of subjective age in a special issue (Rudolph et al., 2019), and, importantly, the work of Zacher and Rudolph (2019) sparked future investigations of this idea (Laguerre et al., 2022). Although Zacher and Rudolph (2019) generated hypotheses instead of research questions, their work *raises more questions* in the literary domain concerned with aging at work. Specifically, under what conditions does subjective age meaningfully describe the aging experience among older workers? Are we capable of distinguishing subjective age from core self-evaluations? The example provided here illustrates a *narrow* challenge (among a small subgroup of researchers) that has the potential to be *moderate* in scope because the challenge could be expanded to other phenomena in the field.

As seen here, applying the problematization method and its principles to research is one way to answer Hyland's (2023) call to question assumptions and generate new ideas. The works cited in this section (e.g., Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011; Zacher & Rudolph, 2019) highlight how this can be accomplished through leveraging theory.

Applying problematization principles in practice: Leveraging stakeholders

Hyland (2023) discusses participatory research as an area for organizational scholars to engage in for continued growth. Assuming that knowledge exists outside of what is actually being published (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2020; Hyland, 2023), and there are "multiple truths" as Hyland (2023) notes, we can gain *additional* insights from participatory settings if we apply problematization

principles. For instance, for any given problem (or series of problems), there are questions that can be posed to stakeholders in a manner that ascertains the assumptions and counter assumptions within that organization.

For example, at different levels of the organization (e.g., the employee, middle management, and senior executive levels), stakeholders could be asked: (a) *at the employee level*, "what do you think middle management and senior leaders assume about your job that they may be wrong about, or are there aspects of your work that they take for granted?"; (b) *at the middle management level*, "what do think subordinates and senior leaders assume about your job that they may be wrong about, or are there aspects of your work that they take for granted?"; and (c) *at the senior executive level*, "what do you think middle management and their subordinates assume about your job that they may be wrong about, or are there aspects of your work that they take for granted?" The proposed questions, for instance, could be added to a root cause analysis (see Punnett et al., 2020), which is a participatory procedure where researchers guide a line of inquiry among stakeholders to determine the true reasons (or causes) for a problem.

Through asking these questions of stakeholders, scholars will not only bring their expertise to bear at an organization, but they can derive information about cognitive and metacognitive (i.e., what they think about us) processes occurring within that organization. Notably, however, asking questions about the assumptions different stakeholders perceive should allow for a triangulation of information that researchers can leverage to resolve a variety of problems that go beyond the initial problem at hand. For example, if there was an accident at a work site and a root cause analysis was conducted, the *assumption* information could be used to address larger issues surrounding communication, climate, and culture in the organization, or the assumptions could be used to generate novel research questions.

Recommendations for I-O psychologists seeking to begin "narrow" or "moderate" challenges in research and practice

In a research setting, to begin challenges that are *narrow* or *moderate* in scope, identify a literary domain of interest, and select a seminal article or theory within that domain (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011). One strategy for identifying core articles could be to read a meta-analysis on a topic—often, the authors provide a succinct overview of theory and constructs. Then, after an in-depth reading of a seminal article or theory, write down the purported facts or truths derived from that work—these facts or truths will serve as the *assumptions* that can be potentially challenged (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011). Alvesson and Sandberg (2011) state that "it is the assumptions that mostly remain implicit or weakly articulated that are the main target in the problematization methodology" (p. 256); therefore, an exercise could be to write down counter assumptions or alternative viewpoints, which, if stronger than the original assumption (or if compelling enough), should form the basis for new research questions and hypotheses (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011). Be sure to keep track of whether a challenge is narrow, moderate, or broad in scope. Creating an Excel sheet for this purpose might prove useful.

In a practice setting, asking stakeholders about problematic policies or practices is one way to identify an area where understanding assumptions is critical. If a problematic policy disproportionally effects a subgroup of employees (representing a narrow problem), or a specific department (representing a moderate problem), it may be worthwhile to inquire about *why* it is in place—from different stakeholders. This may shine light as to whether the policy is informed by problematic assumptions or whether the policy is being poorly implemented—or both. Challenging the premises of a problematic policy should allow for dialogue that will lead to substantive change. This change could be narrow or moderate in scope.

Conclusion

The present commentary was a response to Hyland's (2023) call for I-O psychologists to challenge assumptions in our field. As a guiding framework for challenging assumptions, I argued for the increased usage of the problematization methodology and its principles in research and practice. Although it may be difficult to make sweeping changes in our field, through systematically and incrementally challenging specific schools of thought, as well as deepening our understanding of organizational stakeholders, we will evolve as I-O psychologists alongside our contemporaries.

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