Making a Contribution in Accounting Research, Part I: Types of Contributions

This is first in a series of posts covering how to make an intellectual contribution in academic research in accounting as well as most other business and social science disciplines.

In the academic worlds I interact with – accounting, business, social sciences – one of the words you'll hear time and again is "contribution." This is particularly relevant when you receive a review of one of your own papers and read that it fails to make a large enough "contribution."

So, what exactly constitutes an *intellectual contribution* in accounting research? The short answer is that it tells us something useful that we do not already know. That short answer is not too helpful, however. So, in this post I will convey my more concrete thoughts on what makes a relevant contribution in an academic article.

First, let me lay out some generic categories of contributions and which ones are seen as best in top-tier academic accounting journals. The same general lessons apply to quantitative research in any of the other social sciences or business disciplines (I'll leave aside the notion of a contribution in qualitative research). The following is a distillation of ideas I've learned over the years. For a more detailed discussion of some of these points, see, among others Voss (2003), Slater and Gleason (2012), and Colquitt and George (2011). The main ideas are my take on things, however, so the usual caveat applies.

Replication

A first type of contribution is to replicate, or "re-do," an existing study.

To help make these ideas concrete, I will use the specific example of what leads to *earnings management* in nonprofit organizations. Using an example of a strong, well-published accounting paper, let's look at Eldenburg, Gunny, Hee, and Soderstrom (2011), who examined the relationship between *pay-for-performance incentives* (the independent variable, or IV) and earnings management (the dependent variable, or DV) in US-based nonprofit hospitals. If you were to try to replicate this study, you would draw a new sample of US-based nonprofit hospitals, recreate the authors' measures, and then re-run the statistics using the same statistical procedures as in Eldenburg et al. (2011). You will have thus replicated their study.

While replication studies are needed in academia, unfortunately, they are not highly valued by the pinnacle accounting journals (nor those in other business or social science disciplines). In fact, replication is the "lowest" type of contribution, while in practice means you would likely find your study published in a low-level (or if you're lucky a mid-level) accounting journal.

New Sample or Context

Second, a contribution can be made by taking an existing relationship found in the literature and *applying it in a new geographic or organizational context.*

Returning to our Eldenburg et al. (2011) example, and pointing out that they based their empirical tests on US nonprofit hospitals, someone could come along and test the same IV → DV relationship in a different context. If a different geographic context, the relationship could be tested in a sample of Canadian, or Chinese, or Cambodian hospitals. If a different organizational context, someone else might test the IV → DV relationship in a set of US-based educational nonprofits or environmental nonprofits. In either case, the authors are asking, "We know that X → Y holds in US-based hospitals, but does it also hold in other countries or in other types of nonprofits?"

This is certainly a valid way to build our knowledge and helps us understand such things as idiosyncracies of distinct contexts as well as boundary conditions, etc. However, it is what I would call an *incremental* contribution. This type of contribution, as a general rule, will therefore be relegated to the mid-tier and lower-tier accounting journals.

New Measure (Often with Revised Conceptualization) or New Statistical Technique

A third type of contribution is to make a new measure of one of the key concepts in an established relationship. Continuing our example above, a researcher might come along and develop a new measure of earnings management and then re-test the relationship between pay-for-performance incentives and earnings management in US-based nonprofit hospitals. Often, but not always, this new measurement approach will be spurred by the author's view that the definition of the concept needs updating.

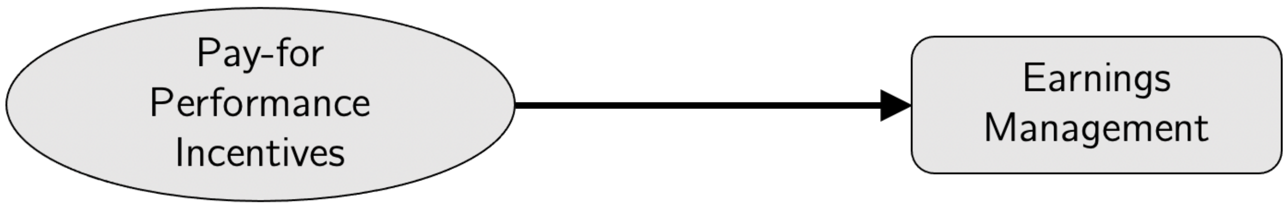
I would also place in this category new statistical tests of the relationship between the independent and dependent variable. For example, if someone comes along and argues that the original test should be done with robust clustered standard errors, then that is an example of this type of argument.

Again, this is a valid way to enhance our knowledge. Nevertheless, if this is the chief contribution, it is another example of an *incremental* contribution that, as a general rule, will also for this reason be relegated to the mid-tier and lower-tier accounting journals.

New Relationship

Lastly, adding a new variable to an existing model— whether a mediator, moderator, or existing explanatory factor—is one of the fundamental ways of doing "innovative" social scientific research (Slater and Gleason 2012; Voss 2003). Note that in all of these cases, it is the additional of a new *relationship* (either new IV, new DV, or new IV/DV combination).

Here is the relationship:



Why is the relationship so important? The short answer: *theory*. Theory fundamentally involves examining the relationship between two or more concepts. We are making a theoretical argument when we try to explain why one concept (earnings management) is determined by another concept (pay-for-performance incentives).

Note that Eldenburg et al. did not come up with the idea that earnings management existed. Where they innovated was in positing and then testing the idea that earnings management was driven by pay-for-performance incentives (they also examined the effects of accounting performance, or the extent to which performance was above or below a benchmark).

Conclusion

In short, when people (reviewers, discussants, co-authors) are talking about a "contribution" or an "intellectual contribution," they are almost always referring to a *theoretical* contribution. This means that at a minimum you should strive to add another conceptual relationship to the literature. This could be a new mediator, a new moderator, a new independent variable, or a new dependent variable. Of course, new definitions, new measures, and new contexts are also helpful but they should not be the sole novelty of any manuscript you're thinking of sending to a top-tier journal.

References

[bibtex file=contribution.bib, format=apa template=av-bibtex-modified sort=year order=desc]