A Longitudinal Empirical Study Into the Buildup of Fluff in My Belly Button

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Clothing businesses have given considerable attention to the way in which clothes “feel” on the body (Sun, Fan, Wu, Wu, & Wan, 2013). They invest hugely into developing fabrics that are cheap yet still provide a high-quality finish that will give consumers a sense of pride in wearing the garment (Farzandi, Razipour, Mousazadegan, & Saharkhiz, 2013). Such an approach is undermined when the fabric frays, is too abrasive, or molts. A key indicator of clothing molting is the buildup of lint in wearers’ navels (Steinhauser, 2009). Accordingly, the phenomenon of the buildup of navel lint is attracting increasing levels of research and an understanding of the factors influencing its sedimentation is emerging.

A review of the material engineering, clothing and fabric sciences, human biology, and nanofiber literatures reveals that there are two gaps in our knowledge. First, no one has conducted longitudinal studies of navel lint deposition. All studies published to date are cross-sectional providing limited insight into its sedimentation. Second, a similar review reveals that the author’s own navel lint has never been studied in a rigorous or scientific manner. This study addresses these two gaps with a longitudinal empirical study of the buildup of my navel lint. Taking note of previous criticisms (e.g., Steinhauser, 2009), air pressure, temperature, and humidity were controlled for, and new and old garments were employed. To give confidence that the differing garments were the prime causal factors (T. Albert, 1984, cited in

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ABC.net.au, n.d.), a naked control group was simultaneously studied over the 3 months of the data collection period.

As you will probably have gathered, this article is getting increasingly ridiculous and, by now, you must have realized that this is a spoof. I did not conduct this study into the buildup of my navel lint and a naked control group does not follow me around. The mind boggles. But despite the humor, there is a serious message in this spoof. I want to draw attention to the way that some authors justify the need for their studies.

I wrote the spoof imagining that I was writing the opening paragraphs of a genuine empirical article into the new science of navel lint deposition. I wanted to adopt the argument structure I see in the opening passages of many management education submissions, but without embarrassing the guilty. I also thought that you would find the spoof amusing and memorable. In this spoof, the empirical study is justified by two reasons: (a) the alleged absence of longitudinal studies into the buildup of belly button fluff and (b) the absence of previous studies on the particular subject. In effect, I asserted that there are gaps that need to be filled. This is a common mistake on many papers that we receive at the Journal of Management Education, and other journals as well, I imagine. I see many papers where the authors try to justify their studies by arguing that there is a gap in the literature that they are filling.

On closer analysis, the gaps in my spoof are erroneous. My alleged first gap is technically wrong. Believe it or not, there have been longitudinal empirical studies into the deposition of navel lint. To the expert eye, all I have done with my incorrect assertion is expose my own shallowness and ill-informed position in this field. The second assertion is troublesome in a different way. Yes, it is correct that there have not been any empirical studies into the buildup of fluff in my belly button. There is a very good reason for this: No one would be interested. Autolinting is not an established field of study and generalizing from the individual case is fraught with problems. It is a gap in the literature and it should remain one.

There are many problems with the mentality that “all gaps must be filled.” First, obviously, is the fact that there are an infinite number of gaps in humanity’s understanding of the universe. It would be impossible to identify all these gaps, let alone fill them. Second, as researchers fill gaps, many more open up as a consequence of the new findings. So, as humanity learns more, we ask more questions. Third, when this mentality determines which research questions should be addressed, the process is somewhat random. The researcher is studying something simply because it has not been done before; not because it is interesting or a crucial next step in understanding a phenomenon. Only blind luck will make this gap worthwhile research. This is
Polyfilla® research, not the laying down of bricks that will ultimately lead to the building of something monumental.

The following fourth problem is perhaps the greatest objection to the “all gaps must be filled” mentality for research justification. If no one has studied a particular issue, it is probably because no one is interested in it. Ironically, therefore, justifying a study because there is a gap in the literature is possibly the worst thing a scholar can do because it is akin to saying, “I’m doing this study because no one else is interested in it.” And if no one else is interested in it, it should not be published and thereby deprive more worthy studies of an audience.

Put bluntly, and returning to the spoof study described at the start of this article, no one (sorry, no sane person) is interested in the buildup of fluff in my belly button. No one has studied it, no one is likely to study it, and no one would waste their time reading a scientific study of it. It will forever remain a gap in the literature, and it is almost certain to remain so. Some, perhaps most, gaps in humanity’s understanding should not be filled.

You might be thinking that it is strange that I rail against people filling gaps in the literature; surely that is the purpose of research, to add to humanity’s sum of knowledge. But no, gaps in the literature are really dangerous things. They indicate what people are not interested in. These are the pieces of research that no one wants to do, that other researchers have deemed trivial or a tangent, and that the funding bodies do not want to support. In fact, a gap is a counter-indicator of what is interesting. Research should not be done to fill gaps and when that is the main justification for the study, the writing is on the wall.

But, I hear you say, I cannot just replicate what others have done before; I must do something different. Yes, this is true, but you do not conduct research because there is a gap; it is not done for the sake of filling a void. Research is done because the gap is interesting. This is the crucial difference. Editors expect you to do new and innovative work and, contrary to popular myth, the newer and the more innovative the work is, the more we are interested in it. But we expect a justification that goes beyond “because no one has done this before.” Instead, we want to know why this research is interesting, how it builds on existing knowledge, and what this study might contribute to our understanding of the world.

Having got that off my chest, a more interesting question arises. How could a study into the buildup of fluff in my belly button be justified? The detail of the following ideas is clearly nonsense; it is the spirit of the justification that I want to convey. The first way to justify such a study might be to identify weaknesses in previous studies. Imagine, for example, that all previous studies of navel lint deposition were conducted on blonde, brown, or
black haired people. The natural extension might be to explore whether the findings from these sources hold for ginger-haired people. And as I have ginger hair, my own fluff deposits might be used for an exploratory investigation. Obviously, a single case would not be strong data, but you get the idea. This justification addresses an important omission in previous work.

A second avenue might be to extend previous work to the next logical step. There is a theory that the body hates colors and does everything it can to expel them:

The comedian Wil Anderson (also known as Professor Wil) has his own theory of BBL (Belly Button Lint). He claims that the body hates colors, and will expel them through the nearest orifice. So green snot leaves via the nostrils, brown faeces via the anus, yellow urine via the urethra and, yes, blue Belly Button Lint via the belly button. (W. Anderson, cited in ABC.net.au, n.d.).

A logical extension and test of this theory might be to test the impact of different colored clothing on the color of navel lint. And for such a study, my own autolinting investigation might be a suitable approach.

A third justification might come from changes in the environment. In this case, from the use of newly developed fibers in clothing manufacture. Do these change the nature of lint deposition? Again, an exploratory investigation of the buildup of fluff in my belly button might give some helpful first results justifying the publication of the study.

Another justification for studying my belly button fluff is that it might be something people care about. For example, imagine that I am producing abnormal amounts of navel lint and that this is causing me discomfort. My doctor would request further investigations to find the cause, the damage it was inflicting, and the remedy. And to help other sufferers of hyperlintism, the results would warrant publication in a medical journal.

These are all studies that have not been done before, but the justification of them is not that they have not been previously conducted, instead it is that they (a) address an important omission in the literature, (b) explore the next logical step in the literature, (c) reassess the field given environmental changes, or (d) tackle an issue that people care about. Although there are other justifications as well, these are some of the most important.

Imagine that you have developed a new approach to teaching leadership. Using the above framework, you might justify it because (a) it if offers a way to teach a core leadership subject for which there are no published resources (Note: Convincing the reviewers and readers that there is such an absence is particularly troublesome); (b) you have used extant methods and found weaknesses in them that you want to eliminate; (c) a new theoretical approach may
have emerged for which new teaching approaches are needed; or (d) you may have evidence that there are problems in the literature, which your new approach addresses. Such reasoning can be persuasive in justifying the need for your innovation.

I should like to make one last point: This spoof illustrates that there is a literature on almost every topic. When I began writing this article, I was not sure if anyone had ever looked at navel lint deposition. But I was very wrong. It may not be the size of the leadership or experiential learning literatures, but it exists, albeit dispersed around many different journals. One scholar, Karl Kruszelnicki, even won an international award in 2002 for his study of navel lint. Sadly, this was an Ig Nobel Prize, but these are quite prestigious because of the attention that they direct toward the research. Ig Nobel prizes go to scientific research that, just like a study into my navel lint, “cannot or should not be reproduced” (Anonymous, n.d.). Accordingly, I realized that if you look hard enough, you will find a literature on almost every subject.

This Issue

Teams and groups is the theme running through the articles in this issue of the journal. Five articles—three research articles and two instructional innovations—all involve teams or groups in some way. William J. Ritchie, Charles J. Fornaciari, Stephen A. W. Drew, and Dan Marlin wrote the first research article. In it, the authors explore the culture of student teams when engaged in strategy simulations. Using the Organizational Culture Assessment Instrument, they were able to detect types of cultures and then examine the impact of these team cultures on performance in the simulation. Market cultures were shown to influence performance, whereas clan and hierarchy cultures did not. The study’s primary finding is that team culture accounts for a large portion of variance in simulation performance.

In the second article, Patricia D. Rafferty looks at how part-time MBA students experience group work assignments and how these experiences contribute to their perception of positive group work outcomes. The author presents a situational work group model that emerged from her detailed analysis of a rich case study. The model comprises facilitator-oriented factors, learner-oriented factors, and collaborative-oriented factors.

The authors of the third research article, Yongmei Bentley, Diane Richardson, Yanqing Duan, Elly Philpott, Vincent Ong, and David Owen, are interested in contemporary issues in project management. In particular, their goal was to design an up-to-the-minute curriculum for an MSc course in project management that reflected current practice. The article is especially important because it shows how a multifactored research-driven approach
can inform the design of teaching. It is an evidence-based approach to curriculum design using desk and empirical research methodologies.

Jennifer L. Kohn notes that business students do not typically read James Madison’s Federalist #10, a seminal work in political theory on the causes of and remedies for factions. She makes the case that they should read this text as it explores the way that factions are rooted in human nature. Therefore, managers should embrace diversity and not try to eliminate factions by surrounding themselves with “yes men,” which is very reminiscent of groupthink (Janis, 1971, 1972). She offers suggestions for using Madison’s work in the classroom with ideas for teaching and assessment.

In the final article in this issue, Janet Hillier and Linda M. Dunn-Jensen focus on business students in team-based projects. They argue that feedback and assessment should be conducted at the team level. The authors suggest that team performance is improved when teams discuss feedback, identify ineffective team behaviors, and take corrective action. They helpfully include resources that readers can use to improve the performance of the teams under their charge.

References