

Do European scholars have specific problems getting published in Anglo-Saxon journals?

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INTRODUCTION

The globalization of the academic environment has led to institutionalization of the notion of academic performance around the need to publish in high-quality international journals. This has resulted in significant increases in the number of submissions to those journals and, naturally, in increases in their rejection rates which often reach over 90 per cent of submissions. A rejection is a daunting experience for any scholar and naturally raises questions about biases inherent in the system, which might give rise to structural advantages or disadvantages for certain types of authors.

Discourse in the field often distinguishes between European and North American scholars as representatives of different research worlds. In the light of this distinction, the title question of this chapter is not surprising. I have faced it on several occasions and presume that many colleagues would be interested in an answer, even if such answer were not straightforward. In a recent reaction to calls for establishing a 'New European School' of entrepreneurship and to narratives about the distinctiveness of European research, Davidsson (2013) tackles directly and effectively the question of possible discrimination against European scholarship in North American journals. His answer in the negative is based on the strong presence of European scholars among the most cited authors in the field, among the authors of published articles in the leading journals in the field, among the

associate editors and editorial board members of those journals, among the members of the Entrepreneurship Division of the Academy of Management, among the submissions to the major conferences in the field, and among the recipients of 'best paper' and 'best dissertation' awards. While some bias may exist in regard to the underlying paradigm of research (for example, positivist versus interpretivist), the magnitude of the bias should be assessed against the baseline rates of the size and intensity of research discourse within each paradigm.

I believe that the answer to the question lies not in exogenous factors such as bias in the system but in endogenous ones, related to how prepared European scholars are to engage and compete in the market for ideas. The peer-reviewed nature of the publication process, wherein authors strive to withstand the natural scepticism of the research community in regard to the focus, rigour and contribution of their work, means that success in publication is not so much about the stand-alone scientific merits of the study as it is about keeping up with the evolving notion of what constitutes timely and rigorous research and about the art of communicating the merits of the study to the peer community. I can safely assume that all aspiring authors have produced competent pieces of research by following established conventions around research design, data collection and analysis. The question, then, is whether they are ready to move from the static, safe environment of their research offices to the dynamic, competitive arena of publishing.

To answer the question, I examine issues related to socialization, training, focus and communication. By comparing European and North American practices – or, in some cases, simply highlighting the North American practices that do not have widespread equivalents in Europe – I make the point that some European scholars may face competitive disadvantage and steeper learning curves at the points at which they submit their first work for publication.

What will also emerge from the comparison is that the question of who is a 'European' scholar is not simply about geographic origin, in line with Davidsson's (2013) recent reflections. Just consider my own case: I am European by origin (Bulgarian), received my training at a European institution (London Business School), am currently based at a European institution (University of Bath), and have spent most of my research career at European institutions. Yet, I am often perceived as a 'North American' scholar.

SOCIALIZATION FOR PUBLISHING

Successful publishing is essentially a tale of persistence and learning. If there is one consistent message that emerges from the accounts of prominent colleagues, it is that they tend to keep a paper 'in play' by sending it to the next journal while at the same time listening and responding to reviewers' feedback, whether by tweaking the paper for the next submission or by modifying their approach to the next research project. I am proud to have my own war story. After completing my PhD and starting my first academic job – at IE Business School in Madrid, Spain – I started working on a project with my then new colleague, Pablo Martin de Holan, on exploration investments by venture capital firms. This was in October 2004 and we were off to promising start: successful submission to the 2005 Academy of Management Conference. We started the publication process in the summer of 2006, submitting the paper to Organization Science. The paper was finally accepted for publication in its seventh journal submission, in February 2012 – almost six years after the first submission and over seven years after the start of the project – in Industrial and Corporate Change (Dimov et al., 2012). In the process we received the following sequence of decisions: 'reject', 'high-risk revise and re-submit', 'reject and re-submit', 'reject', 'desk reject', 'reject', 'high-risk revise and re-submit' (after which we withdrew the paper), and 'revise and re-submit'.

Needless to say, we have learnt a lot in the process and the original and final versions of the paper bear little resemblance.

This process can be overwhelming for scholars who are not socialized into it early on. As a result, there are three reasons that European scholars may face a competitive disadvantage. The first is a question of mental preparation for what is to come. North American PhD programmes are tightly focused on preparing students for academic careers and the reality and pressure of the tenure process in North American institutions. As a result, students are exposed early on to the trials and tribulations of the publishing process, internalizing the war stories of their PhD seminar leaders or advisers and actively sharing strategies and tactics for navigating the process. They are also encouraged to engage with the process early on, submitting work as early as their first year and working with faculty collaborators. In contrast, many European programmes place little emphasis on publishing; in the UK, for instance, there is an established practice of advising PhD students not to work on side projects or engage in publishing until after completing their PhD. As a result, they come out of the PhD programmes ill prepared for the reality of publishing.

The second reason has to do with expectations and emotions. In North American circles, success in submission means getting a 'revise and re-submit' decision. This represents a significant milestone for a paper, getting a foot in the door of the journal, beyond which a paper develops in productive dialogue with two or three specific reviewers. Against such expectations, rejection is a normal outcome, in which the comments by the reviewers represent valuable feedback for improvement and not a judgement on the scholarly identity of the author. Indeed, it is very comforting to many that the most prolific 'stars' in the field experience rejections regularly. In the face of rejection, many authors actively look for the lessons that they can extract for their future submissions. The expectations play out

differently for many European scholars. In the absence of preparation for the publishing process and with the first submission often based on their doctoral thesis – work in which they have become enormously vested – the submission may become an implicit search for approval. As a result, a reject decision may be seen as a personal blow, with the negative emotional surge overwhelming the potential lessons in the review. Although scholars gradually develop ‘thick skin’ in the wake of several rejections, there is a real risk that first rejections – particularly when made on a major, identity-shaping work such as your doctoral thesis – can lead to dejection and turning your back on the top-tier journals. In this regard, the practice of early submissions not only calibrates the emotional reactions to rejections but also does so in the safe, supportive environment of a PhD programme.

The third reason relates to learning to read, interpret and respond to editorial letters and reviewer feedback. At top journals, these can be overwhelming at first, often being as long as the paper itself. Gradually, you learn to distinguish major and minor points, deal breakers, points for negotiation or pushback, and. In the North American practice, PhD students can develop tacit understanding of this by working with faculty collaborators or can simply enlist their help for interpreting the decision letter. I recall from my own PhD experience giving a long rejection letter to a professor who managed to distil it to three key points. I also learnt that ‘ambitious’ was not a compliment for my work but simply a signal that I was trying to pack too much into one paper. Again, in a European context, where such platform for tacit knowledge exchange is missing, scholars can often be at a loss as to how to respond to reviewers’ feedback. In some cases, a revision may simply appear to be too much work, coming on the heels of the total exhaustion following the completion of a doctoral thesis. From such a disadvantaged position, publishing success will take much longer, with many giving up along the way.

TRAINING

In addition to socialization, there are issues related to formal doctoral training in terms of the substantive theories and research methodologies in the field. Doctor of philosophy programmes in North American universities are known for the extensity of their training, with at least two solid years spent on taking PhD courses. These cover not only fundamental research skills such as research design and methodology, but theory- building and disciplinary knowledge. In terms of methodology, the training reflects the latest trends and developments in the field as evident in recent published work. In terms of disciplinary knowledge, there are a series of courses that introduce students to the development and latest stance of the respective field, and help them to identify avenues for further development and points of contribution by developing papers focused on theoretical synthesis and extension. Knowledge of the basic disciplines is then rigorously tested in a comprehensive examination, which is a major milestone in the second year of the programme. Many programmes have first-year milestones such as developing a theory paper on a topic of interest. It is only after passing these milestones that students develop proposals for their dissertation research. These are subject to rigorous assessment (defence), which – in addition to the merits of the research design and methodology – test the student’s ability to frame their research in terms of a distinct contribution to their field of interest as well as to employ the most appropriate methodology for the research question at hand.

My PhD training was of this nature, following London Business School’s complete redesign of its PhD programme to follow the ‘American’ model. This model operates at many other European business schools and is a model to which many other schools aspire in their quest for building research capacity and excellence.

The research training at many European schools, however, is different. While it covers research skills associated with formulating a research design and implementing qualitative and quantitative research methodologies, this is often done within a more generic social science framework, thereby failing to reflect the specific trends and developments in the field. In addition, it largely misses the disciplinary components. Aside from some exposure to disciplinary literature in previous master's training, students review and make sense of the literature essentially on their own. Although this is an important exercise of independent research skills, given the number of journals and volume of academic publications, it is difficult for a non-socialized mind to discern seminal work, theoretical heritage and distil the unique contribution that an article makes. As a result, there is no transfer of tacit knowledge related to the publication process. Students have to discover this knowledge for themselves, once they send their work to journals, via the often dejecting feedback by reviewers that their paper lacks compelling framing, lacks sufficient theoretical development and fails to make a strong theoretical contribution. Provided that there are no fundamental flaws in the design or methodology of the paper, these are ubiquitous reasons for rejecting a paper.

There are two ways in which the lack of disciplinary training bestows a competitive disadvantage. First, it makes it more difficult to plan and articulate a theoretical contribution, the lack of which represents a major ground for rejection. What constitutes a theoretical contribution is a question with which North American scholars grapple from the early days of their PhD training and the answer to which is honed as a tacit skill over many iterations and submitted papers. Often, PhD courses start from some classic paper such as Whetten (1989) and Daft (1995) on the nature of theoretical contribution and tally these against current practice. Whetten's template is particularly useful as it highlights that two often used justifications for the merits of a paper – which work perfectly well for a doctoral thesis and

often for less prominent journals – do not really constitute compelling contributions for the top journals in the field. One relates to simply adding another explanatory variable to account for some incremental variances in an outcome of interest. The skeleton of this argument is that we know a lot about X through its relationship with Y and Z, and we can learn even more by adding W to the equation. If demonstrated, this is solid empirical contribution but does not qualify as theoretical one on the ground that our understanding of the existing theoretical relationships in which X is involved does not really change.

The other often-used justification is that no one has studied X or that no one has studied X in the context of Y. The counter-argument that editors and reviewers tend to make, in the absence of further elaboration, is that simply because something has not been studied does not mean that it should be. What they are looking for is a theoretical reason for conducting a study of this novel phenomenon or context. Addressing this point before submission can significantly increase the chances for a positive outcome at the first round. Very often, simply thinking more deeply beforehand about such justification can lead to some promising insights. This is a key outcome to intensive PhD seminars on a given topic. For instance, a novel phenomenon can lie at the boundary of current theory and can have implications for whether and how this theory can be extended. Perhaps the predictions that the theory would make for this phenomenon would not square with the empirical observations, which will prompt a search for how to extend the theory by incorporating new theoretical constructs or relationships. Similarly, in the case of new context, what generates interest are situation when existing theory predicts things to work in the same way in the new context, but they do not; or when theory predicts that things should not work in the same way in the new context, but they do.

The second way to competitive disadvantage due to lack of disciplinary training relates to keeping up with the methodological rigour of the field. Owing to the increased competition for space in the top journals, the stand-alone merits of a research project have become disconnected from the methodological requirements to get into those journals. Again, in North American practice, PhD students develop a good sense of what these requirements are, which can become a particular point of contention during the defence of your dissertation proposal when the discussion often moves from what is sufficient to get the PhD to what is sufficient to ensure a stream of publications that will help one meet the tenure requirements of their future institutions. Thus, you will see that top journals often have higher sample sizes, perhaps as a result of power analysis intended to determine the sample size that would accommodate a more complex theoretical model. Another trend is that top journals have higher standards for analytical or econometric rigor, with explicit attention devoted to using estimation techniques that are well suited for the nature and distribution of the dependent variable, testing the sensitivity and robustness of the results, and eliminating alternative explanations.

Methodological deficiencies are not limited only to quantitative studies; they apply equally to papers based on qualitative data. While it may appear that leading international journals have smaller proportions of qualitative papers compared to less prominent journals, this may be due to differences in criteria on what constitutes 'good' qualitative work as well as to the spread of associated training. Given top journals' emphasis on theoretical contribution – whether deductively or inductively derived – papers that focus on rich description for its own sake are turned down for failing to extract theoretical insights or juxtapose the description against existing theory. These journals value papers in which the selection of cases serves theoretical purpose and the analysis derives insight both within and

across cases. Against this benchmark, proper training is less widespread, which explains the relatively smaller number of submissions and acceptances. On the other hand, rich descriptions of single cases represent a strong tradition in European research, interweaved with stronger presence of interpretivist or phenomenological paradigms. The difficulty for an author coming from this tradition lies in catering to a journal mission highlighting the importance of theoretical contribution.

Since these are all issues related to the core research design of the project, by the time a paper is submitted they are impossible to fix without going back to collect additional data. As a result, some of these will be seen as fundamental flaws of a paper. Raising awareness of them will ensure that the next research project will be more strongly designed, attuned with the practices in the leading international journals. The competitive disadvantage of many European scholars is that they have to learn this as they go, at the expense of receiving rejections with constructive but often brutal feedback, while for their North American counterparts such learning occurs much earlier on and in the safer context of doctoral training.

FOCUS

Anglo-Saxon journals – or indeed any other journals – vary in their explicit focus on small and medium-size firms (SMEs) and/or entrepreneurship. There seems to be a divide in the degree to which these terms are seen as central to the editorial mission of the journals. Much of European discourse seems to be about SMEs and, accordingly, any research that focuses on SMEs would be readily classified as entrepreneurship research. In this setting small business management, small business owners and entrepreneurship are treated as interchangeable terms.

On the other hand, entrepreneurship carries a different meaning in other, often North American but not exclusively so, journals. It reflects the seminal work of Venkataraman (1997), Shane and Venkataraman (2000) and Gartner (1985) which aimed to define the conceptual boundaries of the field. One definition centres on the discovery, evaluation and exploitation of entrepreneurial opportunities, which involves, albeit not exclusively, new businesses. The other reflects a sociological perspective of entrepreneurship (Aldrich and Ruef, 2006; Thornton, 1999) and focuses on the creation/emergence of new organizations.

Journals that explicitly operate in this realm – whether new opportunities or new organizations – may inevitably deem SME-oriented research as not falling within their domain unless dealing with new firms or the opportunity-oriented activities of SMEs. Wiklund et al. (2011) make this point explicitly in their recent editorial introduction of the special issue of *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice* on the future of entrepreneurship research:

“We strongly recommend that entrepreneurship research be unified as a field approached theoretically and empirically in terms of the phenomenon. We propose that the phenomenon of ‘emergence of new economic activity’ lies at the heart of entrepreneurship (where ‘economic’ has a much wider meaning than ‘commercial’). This might seem like an obvious statement, but the past shows us that this has not been the case. ... Rather, the problem is that to a large extent, the entrepreneurship field has instead been unified by an interest in small, young, or owner- managed businesses, that is, the context, with far less cohesion and agreement concerning what it is about these small businesses and new firms that is so interesting (the phenomenon). Rather, anything related to small, young and/or owner-managed firms can be found under the rubric of entrepreneurship. ... As a consequence of this shift from a context- based to a phenomenon-based view of entrepreneurship, clarification of exactly what constitutes this phenomenon is needed. ...The potentially most significant implication of this phenomenon-based view is that it allows us to distill what exactly it is that is entrepreneurial about the things that we study and thus, it establishes the boundaries of our field”. (p. 5)

The above is a very clear statement about a bifurcation in the field, with some scholars interested in context (SME) and other interested in a phenomenon (emergence of new economic activity). Given that a lot of ‘European’ scholars are effectively interested in SME

research, then a quick answer to the question of difficulty is whether they are simply submitting work to journals with an explicitly stated focus on the phenomenon of entrepreneurship to the exclusion of papers that focus simply on SMEs. This suggests that scholars should pay careful attention to the mission of each journal and should not make inferences based on crude categorizations such as Anglo-Saxon or European versus North American journals. To illustrate this point, I provide below excerpts from the aims of three prominent journals in the field: *Journal of Business Venturing* (JBV), *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice* (ETP), and *International Small Business Journal* (ISBJ).

The *Journal of Business Venturing* provides a scholarly forum for sharing useful and interesting theories, narratives, and interpretations of the antecedents, mechanisms, and/or consequences of entrepreneurship. This multi-disciplinary, multi-functional, and multi-contextual journal aspires to deepen our understanding of the entrepreneurial phenomenon in its myriad of forms.

Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice's mission is to publish original conceptual and empirical papers that contribute to the advancement of the field of entrepreneurship. Topics include, but are not limited to: National and International Studies of Enterprise Creation; Small Business Management; Family-owned Businesses; Minority Issues in Small Business and Entrepreneurship; Research Methodologies; Venture Financing; Corporate and Non-profit Entrepreneurship.

The International Small Business Journal publishes the highest quality original research papers on small business and entrepreneurship.

Several useful insights emerge from these excerpts. First, JBV focuses exclusively on the phenomenon of entrepreneurship, albeit without defining what the phenomenon involves. This, I believe, is purposeful open-endedness that puts the onus on the submitting

author to articulate what is entrepreneurial about their research topic by linking their work to previous work in the journal. In contrast, although ETP also focuses on entrepreneurship, it explicitly includes topics such as small business management and family-owned businesses that would be seen by many as not dealing with entrepreneurial phenomena. Nevertheless, the actual timeliness and viability of these topics in the journal is reflected in the research streams and conversations within the journal to which submitting authors need to connect. These are predominantly steered towards entrepreneurship. Finally, ISBJ's aim suggests that 'small business' and 'entrepreneurship' are distinct categories – in line with the above distinction between context and phenomenon – while being open to both. These differences in focus represent important tacit knowledge of the field. The implication for scholars not aware of them is that with overemphasis on a research context focused on SMEs and no explicit articulation of the 'entrepreneurship' aspects of the submitted paper there may be strong grounds to desk reject a paper for lack of fit. Where scholars focus their research is a question of field identity and career aspirations. Those who aspire to establish themselves in the field of entrepreneurship and to publish in the top journals in that field have to make their research choices accordingly and convey a clear sense of the entrepreneurial phenomenon they examine.

COMMUNICATION

In the publication process, you engage in a conversation with editor and reviewers about the merits of the submitted research paper. The conversation metaphor offered by Huff (1999) is my favourite. I can vividly imagine entering a room full of people already clustered into conversation groups. To join a conversation, I have to pause and listen to its flow, waiting for an opportune moment to interject something that relates to what has been

said and that can take the conversation forward. Throwing in comments that are off topic and disconnected from the flow of the conversation are likely to earn me perplexed glances and leave me alone, with people quietly regrouping behind my back.

A journal is a series of conversations, one of which a submitted paper attempts to join. Although the history of a conversation is clear, where the conversation is going is not. This is where an author can leave a creative mark, interpreting the past conversation trail in a new light and steering the conversation in a particular direction. The first impressions of a paper are created by its introduction, which signals to the editor and reviewers whether and why the paper is timely, interesting and appropriate. Perhaps more importantly, the introduction signals to the editor the conversations in which the author is seeking to engage and thus facilitates the selection of reviewers. Clearly, having the right reviewers – those most closely attuned to the topic and message of the paper – is key at this stage. Whether this occurs depends on how the paper is framed.

Consistent with the points made in the previous sections, lack of or insufficient socialization and training can put an author at a disadvantage when it comes to communicating effectively how the paper fits in the literature. To the extent that this has not been practised as part of your PhD training, you face a steeper learning curve when having to grasp the nuances of framing in the 'live' setting of actual submissions. A piece of advice that accomplished scholars often give at professional development workshops is to send a paper for peer review before submitting it to a journal. But the effectiveness of a peer review depends on having peers who have published in the particular journal or in journals of similar standing. There is thus a network effect whereby there is a strong differentiation between academic environments with high concentration of accomplished scholars, training and

socialization, and environments where these elements are lacking. This differentiation does not run along the North America–Europe divide, but cuts across it.

Framing a research paper is a creative act of mapping the field of research in a way that highlights its features of interest and exposes gaps in the map. The analogy of maps is particularly useful here. Maps are abstract representations of areas that focus on particular features of interest, for example, political boundaries, physical terrain, temperature, air pressure, rainfall, and so on. In the same way, research in the field can be represented in terms of particular topic, theory, relationship or research setting. Identifying the feature that will be emphasized in the paper represents the ‘hook’ around which the paper will be wrapped, aimed at arresting the reviewers’ attention. In his classic paper on what makes an article interesting, Davis (1971) points to challenging some of the assumptions held by the audience, highlighting a gap between perceptions and reality. In this sense, ‘interesting’ stands at a fine balance between ‘absurd’ (challenging too many assumptions) and ‘obvious’ (challenging too few). Because different audiences have different assumptions, the framing of the paper is about identifying the audiences whose assumptions can be challenged in the realm of ‘interesting’. Davis goes on to list a number of templates of the sort ‘while everyone thinks that X is Y, it is actually Z’.

For example, in two papers (Dimov and Shepherd, 2005; Dimov et al., 2007) we examined the relationship between the backgrounds of venture capital managers and respectively the success of their investments and the nature of their investment decisions. The papers were framed in different ways, using different maps of the field and thus highlighting different gaps. The first focuses on particular theory – human capital – and makes the argument that while scholars perceive human capital as a monolithic, we show it to be fragmented. In other words, while studies tend to focus on the quantity of human capital, we

show that its qualitative nature matters. The second paper, in contrast, focuses on a particular topic – venture capital (VC) decision-making – and makes the argument that while scholars perceive that there exists a single decision-making process across VC firms, we show this process to vary with the nature of the VC managers and social standing of the VC firms.

Deciding on how to frame a paper is a long, iterative process, not unlike the development of an entrepreneurial idea. In this regard, informal chats with colleagues or conference presentations are vital forums for testing initial idea with relevant audiences. The response and feedback you are likely to get is often of the ‘Have you thought of X?’ type, which can point for new ways of seeing the paper.

Another issue of communication relates to the language and writing style of the paper. Non-native English speakers face the hurdle of making their paper readable and easy to follow. Even native English speakers need to be aware of differences between American English and other variants. Informal feedback can identify these issues early on and the authors can retain the help of a copy editor to ensure that they do not detract from the paper once submitted. In terms of writing style, some journals have distinct formats that reviewers expect to see, which in turn facilitates the assessment of the paper in the face of the time pressures that reviewers face. Thus, when a paper is not written in the particular style, reviewers may become frustrated by the amount of cognitive effort need to grasp the main ideas in the paper, which in turn prevents them from providing more developmental feedback.

CONCLUSION

The above reflections suggest that the answer to the opening question is a qualified ‘yes’; not all European scholars face difficulties in publishing in top international journals, but

some do. These difficulties are in the form of competitive disadvantage and steeper learning curves owing to lack of timely socialization into the publishing process, lack of disciplinary training, research focus that is tangential to the explicit mission of the journals, and underdeveloped tacit knowledge in articulating how a paper fits and makes a contribution to the field. It is important to note that these difficulties emerge from relative standing rather than stand-alone deficiency. With an increasing number of scholars competing for limited space in the top journal, the intensity of competition increases and so do the requirements for getting in. Little differences early in your academic training and socialization can grow into large performance differentials later on. A PhD student who is better trained can publish a paper in a top journal before graduating, which will help him or her get a job at an institution with higher research profile. This will in turn expose the person to accomplished peers who can further accelerate his or her publishing productivity. This will in turn attract top-quality doctoral students who will provide further acceleration, and so on.

Although all these difficulties can be overcome the hard way, through sheer persistence and learning, this path is laden with emotional strain and dejection and may not be compatible with the shorter time frames for academic promotion. With the globalization of our academic community, there are many actions that you can undertake to shorten the learning process. Attending doctoral or junior faculty consortia, particularly at the major international conferences in management and entrepreneurship, can help you develop a network of peers that can facilitate tacit knowledge transfer and provide emotional support. Disciplinary training workshops can improve the formulation and design of the research project, which can pre-empt fundamental flaws later on. Paper development workshops can help with framing a paper and articulating its theoretical contribution. Outside of these formal

forums, you can reach out in an informal manner to other scholars in the field to build collaborative relationships, which can greatly accelerate learning.

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