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How our mindset matters: practical contemplations for countering instrumentalism in research

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper presents a discussion between a junior and a senior scholar. It aims to capture, in directly practical terms, some aspects of the challenging situation that any scholar tends to face these days in the current 'publish-or-perish regime'. The focus is on scholars' mindset options and their agentic possibilities, often ignored in the constant pressure to 'just get published'. It aims at offering encouragement and hints regarding how to keep carrying out the craft of a good scholarship in the spirit of epistemic self-respect.

Design/methodology/approach – Experience-based 'auto-fictional' dialogue between a junior and a senior scholar.

Findings – The authors emphasise the importance of adopting a mindset focused on pursuing a good scholarship – a systematic research approach to consistently uphold high standards of research integrity – thereby avoiding traps like easy shortcuts and "reverse-order instrumentalism". The authors suggest that all researchers possess at least some degree of agency. The authors propose that relying solely on the oscillating position of a 'conscious performer' is insufficient; a more robust, non-instrumentalist mindset is necessary.

Originality/value – This paper offers guidance and practical solutions to tackle the current complex conditions which the 'publish-or-perish regime' poses and stresses the pressing need to avoid instrumentalism. The dialogue pays attention to how to do so in journals' review processes, and which kind of agentic possibilities all researchers possess to carry out their research in the spirit of good scholarship, thereby avoiding instrumentalism.

Keywords Agency of researchers, Experience-based auto-fictional dialogue, Importance of a researcher's mindset, Publish-or-perish regime

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

This paper shares the increasing concern about accelerating instrumentalism in academic research, which seems to appear in all scholarly fields from sciences to humanities and social studies, including management and accounting research (Hopwood, 2007; Humphrey and Gendron, 2015; Becker and Lukka, 2023; Rhodes and Pullen, 2023) [1]. The burgeoning research literature has identified numerous drivers of this tendency. These include the New Public Management doctrine, strengthening neoliberalism and managerialism, the hype

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around performance measurement and management, reliance on university and journal rankings, the frequent use of tenure track systems and intensifying competition among academics. These factors, to mention only the potentially most important ones, have contributed to the vastly increasing working paper and journal publication volumes on a global scale (Alvesson *et al.*, 2017) and the emergence of a 'publish-or-perish regime' that has made (journal) publications a commodity in the academic career markets (Van Dalen and Henkens, 2012; Clarke and Knights, 2015; Becker and Lukka, 2023). The threat is that the original ideas of what constitutes the craft of 'good scholarship' get lost in this instrumentalist 'rat race' where, at worst, the primary goal becomes cranking out research publications mainly for enhancing CVs (Willmott, 2011; Messner, 2015; Aboubichr and Conway, 2023; Ramassa *et al.*, 2024). Hence, the research enterprise risks losing its meaning (Alvesson *et al.*, 2017). While we have already gained a notable understanding of this complex set of issues, we still lack guidance and practical solutions to tackle this unhealthy condition, which poses a significant threat to the future of academia. Our paper, using an experience-based 'auto-fiction' method, is presented as a discussion between a junior and a senior scholar [2]. It aims to capture, in directly practical terms, some aspects of the challenging situation that any scholar tends to face these days. We map in detail the various positions scholars could choose from when receiving journal feedback – and, eventually, probe into our ultimate motivation for doing research (Becker and Lukka, 2023; DeMott *et al.*, 2024). The focus is on scholars' mindset options and their agentic possibilities, which are often overlooked in the constant pressure to 'just get published'. The rhetorical style of the piece is selected to facilitate readers' recognition of these situations and positions and help them subjectively immerse themselves in the problem area. The piece urges scholars to go even beyond being merely "conscious performers" who can reflexively oscillate between resistance and compliance (Courtois *et al.*, 2020). Given the severity of the current condition, all academics, including the more cognizant conscious performers, should opt for more active modes of resisting the dysfunctional consequences of the publish-or-perish regime than merely the rather 'mild' balancing oscillation. We offer practical guidance on how to carry it out and, generally, encourage researchers not to give up striving for good scholarship in the spirit of genuine scholarly self-respect.

Conversation between Alex and Robin

The context: Alex, a postdoctoral researcher whose PhD was accepted a year ago, has requested an informal meeting over coffee with Robin, an experienced scholar with several publications in leading journals, and who has recently joined the department [3] [4]. The two have already gotten to know each other a bit and have noticed they get along well. Hence, Alex decided to turn to Robin for some tips and views from a more senior scholar. The discussion turned out to have much more width and depth than either of the two had expected.

"So, what's up, Alex? Are you okay?" Robin asked after the two had found nice seats in a peaceful corner of the university café.

"Good that you can spare some time for a chat. I'm good, thanks". Alex says and smiles a bit, but then continues with some frustration in tone. "But, well, Robin, you may remember that paper, co-authored with another postdoc, I presented last year at a conference where we met…? Can you imagine this paper is still a work-in-progress and has now been rejected by two top-tier journals? Nothing seems good enough for those journals… I guess we must start thinking about some other journals next".

"Oh boy, sorry to hear this, Alex. It is certainly challenging to get your work published in these so-called 'top-tier journals'. Been there, done that… With their large number of

submissions, getting rejected, unfortunately, must be viewed as *the* default outcome. Some of the journal editors even take pride in having a high rejection rate!".

"Now, Alex, did both desk-reject the manuscript, or did at least one of them provide you with reviews? If so, how did you find their quality and helpfulness? How did you use them?".

"No, no, not desk rejected, we got reviewer comments from both journals. With the first one, we got four pages of them in the first round. Of course, we checked all of them and made all the changes the reviewers were requesting. In the second review round, the reviewers made it clear our response was inadequate and came up with a new set of comments, which we tackled alright. Or so *we* believed…".

Alex takes a sip of coffee and goes on. "In the third round, both reviewers showed impatience and had suggested rejection, which resulted in the paper getting dismissed by the editor. We then sent the paper to the second journal, from which we got again numerous reviewer comments and a 'high-risk revision' decision. After responding to all comments, the paper was rejected after the second review round. So, we are back in square one".

Looking confused and exhausted, Alex cries out. "You know, Robin, I am no longer sure about the quality or helpfulness of those reviews, nor the review processes. If we do what the reviewers ask and still get rejection, what use do they have?".

"I see what you mean, Alex… To be honest, this sounds like something that happens quite frequently: Researchers follow reviewers' instructions to the letter, and, to their surprise, the outcome is still a reject…".

Robin leans forward. "You know what, I wonder whether you perhaps took the reviewers' comments up in a too piece-meal manner, and the outcome was no better paper…? Did you start your revision work by considering how the main storyline of the paper would be affected if you simply accommodate most, if not all, of the reviewers' comments? At times, the reviewers' comments differ from each other so much that following all of them will make the paper inconsistent. And that's the worst outcome".

Alex looks hesitant, then admits. "Well, we kind of did… Or, to be honest, perhaps only at the very beginning and only in passing. Then, very soon, we concluded there was no way we could keep our original idea and, at the same time, deal with all, or even most, of the reviewers' comments…".

"Right, I see. But you know, Alex, it is all too typical that researchers quite easily drop their key ideas when revising their papers, just to play it safe and please the reviewers. Yet, after all, it is not the reviewers' paper, but yours! The first thing in the revision work is to consider the big picture of the paper and make sure to keep that in your own command. You seem to have skipped ensuring this, didn't you?".

Alex looks surprised and irritated. "Well, we kind of did… as we felt we had to! Are you proposing that we should have started to challenge the reviewers' views against our own? Is that a wise strategy to get top-tier publications? I've been told that the best way to get your work published in those journals is to follow reviewers' comments as closely as possible, irrespective of what you might have had in mind before getting their feedback. So, Robin, are you saying this is not the right strategy?".

The meaning and role of pursuing 'good scholarship'[5]

"Hold on a bit, Alex… We seem now to have many looming things underlying this discussion… One is the general aim of our endeavour as researchers. Is it something that we could call 'good scholarship', or is it primarily just to get our works published? Does publishing in the so-called 'top-tier journals' guarantee having exercised good scholarship? Or does pursuing a good scholarship guarantee the publication of your works in those

journals? What eventually establishes the craft of good scholarship in the first place? There is even more to it, but why not discuss these tough questions first?".

"Well, Robin, that sounds interesting, let's do that! But could you start by explaining in a bit more detail why you said *either* good scholarship *or* getting your work published? Are you suggesting somehow that if someone publishes in top-tier journals, let's say in one of those FT50-ranked [6] journals, it wouldn't be a sure sign of quality work? Of course, I assume that with good scholarship you mean high-quality work, right?".

"Very good question, Alex, as many of us would indeed simply equate the two! Of course, 'top-tier journals' normally publish solid work, but I suggest we still should not take this equation for granted. – There are so many things conditioning whether one gets published in those journals viewed as top-tier ones, and it is not clear whether all of them relate to good scholarship only. In addition, it is far from straightforward to define or recognize quality in academic research, as stressed by David Bedford and his co-authors in their recent paper [7]".

Alex leans back in the chair with a furrowed brow. "Okay… What kind of conditioning things are you talking about?".

"Well, Alex, all this talk about "you have to think about your audience" or "you need to always make it clear early in the process to which journal you are targeting" is over-emphasizing the publishing part of the process over the underlying serious research work itself. This surely is an outcome of our current publish-or-perish culture, but we should not regard the goodness of this approach as granted and accept it just like that. All too many are these days thinking that playing the 'publication game' with journals is the *central* thing".

"Very interesting, Robin, because many other senior scholars tend to *stress* how important it is to target, as soon as possible, a certain journal, preferably one of the 'top journals', and thereby focus on a certain kind of assumed audience. All the rest should then follow from this starting point, like getting to know the relevant doctrine. I tend to hear this kind of advice at workshops and conferences, too. Are you saying this is not aligned with the idea of good scholarship, or what do you mean by this notion?".

"A tough but very important question, Alex. Most certainly, the 'top journals' require us to do careful work so that the outcome signals proper command of the expected doctrine, looks rigorous, and is targeted to a certain audience. But this may be an outcome of a process in *reverse order*; so, it was the journal's anticipated expectations that conditioned and framed the process right from its beginning. This might be extremely harmful from the viewpoint of good scholarship".

Alex leans forward, eager to hear more. "Ah, I see. Please, go on".

Now Robin seems to be getting it really going. "Well, to me, good scholarship means research that is driven primarily by the explicated importance of the research question. It connects careful and uncompromised thought work, empirical work, and write-up work, and produces something meaningful that adds to our theoretical understanding or supports solving some relevant policy issues in practice [8]. Kai DeMott and his colleagues touch upon this very helpfully in their recent *QRAM* paper dealing with the scholarly development of early career researchers" [9].

"But most importantly, Alex, publishing in a suitable journal should *follow* from having carried out a good research process outlined like that – and *not* the other way round! It has become all too usual to turn the process upside down and place the publication target at the start of the process. But then the cart is put before the horse! We should not let the pursuit of getting published hijack the process of conducting our research properly!". [10]

"But hold on, Robin, setting first the publication target is precisely what we are repeatedly instructed to do in the doctoral studies and seminars! People often ask where you intend to submit the presented paper. So, your comments amaze me, Robin".

"Yeah, Alex, this is unfortunately where we have come down to… But many worried recent studies are arguing that concentration on playing the 'publication game' only leads to mediocre research with only limited scholarly ambition, to conformism, and over-stressing the canons of rigorousness over taking the risk, followed by not daring to be innovative – in sum, to not-so-meaningful research, which even often is just boring [11]. I'm afraid these worries apply particularly to publishing in the 'top-tier journals' because with them, the competition for the place in the sun is toughest, and researchers are often ready to do whatever is expected to get their works published in them".

Alex keeps looking surprised and bewildered. "Now I'm confused… If I am trying to publish in 'top-tier journals', surely I need to present a clear and interesting research question. Then, I need to conduct excellent empirical work and write-up work, and finally have some contribution claims to make, typically three of them, right?".

"Gee, three contributions, the magic number…" Robin says, smiling a bit in an ironic vein. "Sure, Alex, researchers must do most of these things to get their works published in 'top-tier journals'! But my point is that, in so doing, researchers may still be too much 'slaves' of the current publish-or-perish condition. So, unless we watch out, we may not be quite conscious of how much our work is framed by the established paradigmatic beliefs, hyped theories, and conformance with the preferred implicit, even tacit, rules and norms of research communities in hegemony. This is a worrying systemic condition, endangering the survival of more original and innovative scholarship – a condition which we therefore should resist and fight, starting with emancipating ourselves!".

After a small pause, Robin adds, in a somewhat bitter tone. "Institutional career ambition – at times meaning career obsession – is too often confusing and compromising the scholarly ambition. Those of us less driven by career ambition have more room for being obsessed with advancing our genuine knowledge and understanding. The proportion of scholars of this latter type should certainly increase, and they should be encouraged and helped as best we can".

Alex hesitates for a moment, then nods. "I see… So, in other words, we can be blinded by the silently accepted rules of the publishing game. Hmm… I think I might buy that… But how to deal with the reviewer comments then?".

Robin takes a deep inhale and then says, "In general, any set of journal feedback comments should be taken as a sparring partner to your work. Consider them seriously, but do not let them hijack your research agenda – which you should always have! Some of the comments you find helpful just to accommodate, and some others you can just drop, explaining that in your memo of revision".

Robin goes on. "Especially in the so-called 'top-tier journals', you may be easily tempted to give up what you really had in mind with your research, getting carried away by just wanting to get published. Hence, we should make sure not to lose our soul and integrity as independent researchers in those processes – to me, that's a question of life and death! Cynthia Courtois and her co-authors refer to this by using the expression that researchers 'innocently devote themselves to the sirens of management instruments' [12] – even though I'm not so sure whether the innocence is always there".

After a short but effective pause, Robin continues, "However, an important caveat: Of course, we also need to remember self-criticalness. At times, feedback from a journal may reveal the hollowness of our initial ideas and work. In those instances, going humbly and neatly back to the drawing board may be the best option for you – and an indication of good scholarship, too".

"Well, Robin, I think that's spot on! We might have been too hasty with our paper and just followed all the reviewer comments without thinking them through profoundly enough. To be honest, I'm starting to realize that we actually should have gone to the drawing board after those first comments and even reconsidered our research question and its motivation".

Still looking a bit confused, Alex continues. "But what did you mean by the 'reverse order' you mentioned earlier? Could you please elaborate on that? Because what I have been taught is that we need to be able to produce publications regularly and in as good journals as possible. That's why we also should think carefully about the journal outlet to aim for and the expectations it brings along with it. If one of the purposes of scholarly work is to get your work published so that others can appreciate and learn from it, isn't this exactly what should be done?".

"Oh boy, Alex, that is a crucial point indeed! So many researchers, both juniors and seniors, take these days what I would call the 'reverse order' process as the natural one. This has become a taken-for-granted view, a paradigm. However, it is easily in stark contrast with a process where the motivated research question is genuinely driving the research process – which I would like to call a process following the idea of good scholarship. Not only is the 'reverse order' process problematic on a deep ethical level, as it tends to place our work as researchers as primarily instrumental in just seeking to get measurable publications, thereby corrupting the ethical ground of the process. It also tends to lead researchers to work with a low degree of criticalness within the existing, established theoretical or methodological frames, letting them limit their scholarly imagination. Of course, also following this, these days normalized path may turn out to be a challenging route to get published in journals, where competition is the toughest, no question".

Alex listens intently, then says. "If this is the case, then it seems I've veered off course in my approach to carrying out my research… I've thought what you now call a 'reverse order' process is precisely appropriate, but I'm not sure any longer… You see, I have always wanted to do good research in the first place, and in so doing, even succeed in academia".

"That sounds good, Alex! And don't get me wrong: There's nothing wrong in doing research within the existing frames as such – so long as the process is *not* run in the 'reverse order' where the motivation is often overly instrumental, not genuinely developed from the importance of the topic and the research question as it should [13]. To be honest, most studies turn out to be conducted rather neatly within the existing frames – already Kuhn appreciated the "normal science" within paradigms, for instance, to cross-check the results of prior studies [14]. Hence, studies based on existing frames may well represent good scholarship alright".

Alex's face now shows some relief. "Sounds good! The more you explain your ideas, the more they start to make sense. It is just that they contrast quite much with many others I've been hearing this far…".

Robin just goes on. "If studies are conducted in the 'reverse order', their likelihood to produce any very innovative results tends to be inherently small, since 'playing the publication game' along well-established, small-risk lines plays too big a role. In turn, researchers who initially free themselves from targeting to publish in any particular journal, have thereby also at least an *opportunity* to carry out higher-risk innovative research – and hence to do research which has an opportunity to happen 'outside of the box'. Of course, this route does not give any guarantee for innovativeness, but at least it offers that opportunity in principle" [15].

Alex looks now even more relieved, but then the original concern comes back to mind. "What you are saying indeed makes sense and takes me back to the practical question of our rejected paper. Could it be that this was exactly what happened to us? As we tried to follow the reviewers' comments to the letter, we tried to force our idea into a box it could not fit, just

for the sake of getting the paper published. Perhaps we should have gone back to the drawing board for real, to think about the robustness of our core problematization. Then we could have started to build from there, not getting caught up in the pressure to publish. Would this be in line with your thinking of how to correct the order of the process, to do it properly?".

"Yes, Alex, sure it would! And doing all of it properly is the key idea of good scholarship – no shortcuts in doing good research!".

Robin goes on. "But I wonder what exactly the trajectory of the entire research process was… Did you also run your underlying research process in the 'reverse order' in this particular case? To evaluate *properly* the questions that worry you is impossible without, firstly, reading your manuscript and the reviewers' comments on these review rounds and, secondly, hearing in some detail about the underlying research process. Now we have mostly only discussed what happened in the review processes. Anyway, you say you wish to conduct good research – that is the core good thing! You also wish to publish – this is what all researchers eventually want. But an appropriate order of things in the research process is decisive to be able to balance these two things so that the craft of good scholarship is not compromised".

Alex looks now embarrassed. "To be honest, Robin, I must admit we ran the entire process in the 'reverse order', as our primary and urgent aim was to get our research published in a top-tier journal. This then influenced our entire research process, including the way we approached the review comments… Could you please elaborate further on how you see things going differently in these two optional scenarios of running these processes?".

Robin ponders a while and then takes a sheet of paper and starts sketching a schema on it […] and then gradually starts talking again […].

Researcher's differing mindset options

"This is such a broad question that perhaps better focus today on how the optional mindset scenarios play out in the review process stage with journals. Here, I'm drafting a figure on the effects of my two optional scenarios, concerning that phase of the overall research process (see Figure 1). Of course, to dig into the essence, this is just a simplified dichotomic sketch; in reality, there are more shades of grey. In this thought experiment, let's consider a situation where a researcher has received the rather typical journal feedback: revise and resubmit, an "RR". You see, here on the left, the key difference is the mindset, which refers to the *main* underlying idea of the researcher for running their research process. Is it primarily about trying to get a piece of their research published? Or is it, first of all, about trying to conduct a scholarly analysis of a certain well-motivated research question? In the first-mentioned mindset, the process flows in the instrumentalist, publication-driven mode, leading to what I'd call a 'reverse order' process. In the second-mentioned mindset again, the process works, from the scholarly viewpoint, in an "appropriate order" starting from the well-motivated research question. This I'd call a good scholarship".

Alex nods slowly and thoughtfully, mumbling in a quiet voice, "Hmmm… right… driven mainly by scholarly curiosity… avoiding being obsessed by the targeted outlet…".

Robin goes on, now and then checking whether Alex is following the long and winding storyline. "There are two important *similarities* between what these mindsets imply in the review process stage: One, in both optional mindsets, the researcher wishes to get their work *eventually* published. And two, in both mindsets, after having received the RR decision, the researcher has six decision options from which to choose. But as you can see, just *how* the researcher is considering and weighing these six decision options likely differs fundamentally between the two paths, driven by the differing mindsets".

[While talking, Robin moves the spike of the pen on the paper sheet…].

"In a nutshell, in the publication-driven mindset", Robin explains, "the researcher is more readily adopting a merely technical approach to accommodating the comments received, perhaps even lending the 'driver's seat' to the reviewers through primarily seeking to please and certainly not annoy them – since with this mindset the researcher, first of all, just wishes to get the work published. In the well-motivated research question driven mindset, in turn, the process is much more likely geared to an independent working of one's own, yet with the help of the comments received. In this scenario, it is also possible that the researcher even decides to withdraw the paper from this journal's process, in case they feel they want to follow their original agenda and the current reviewers, or the editor, are not indicating sufficient encouragement for it. In contrast, having granted an RR, the researcher with a publication-driven mindset is inclined to avoid such withdrawal if there is just any chance to get the work published in the journal".

"This is a very helpful figure and explanation, Robin, makes perfect sense. It is not about whether one wants to publish eventually – we all want it! – but for what reason one conducts the research overall. I can see how the differing ultimate mindsets in doing research, publication-driven or motivated research question driven, have many implications along the way in the process. Like in this case, how a researcher might encounter, ponder, and respond to review comments in a journal's review process".

Alex looks relieved, but a bit sad, too. "Now, Robin, I feel a bit stupid. As I now think of it, I recall how you have kept saying this in various instances all along, like at that doctoral colloquium some years ago. It seems I never fully absorbed your key message. Even if I was basically motivated by the scholarly curiosity towards my project, I just kept slipping towards the publication-oriented mindset, and eventually, it seems, I started to run the process in reverse order, not realizing that I was losing my grip".

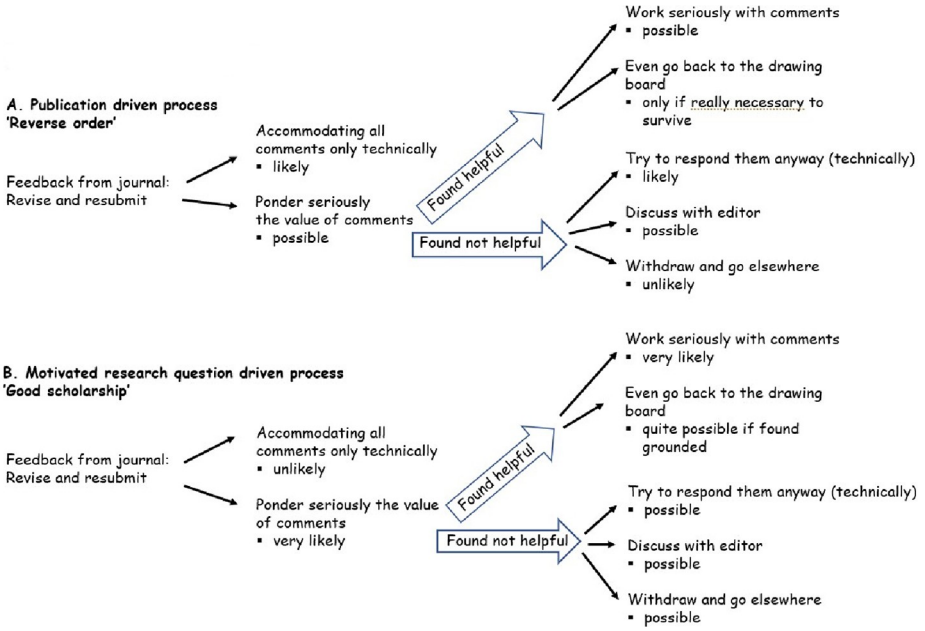

Figure 1. Author's mindset options
Source: Authors' own work

"Great, Alex, sounds good that you now realize that! A better future starts from admitting one's own mistakes".

"Yeah, that's so true…" sighed Alex and continued, "Robin, you also mentioned earlier how we should not take it for granted that the top-ranked journals represent better scholarship than the others do. What do you think are the potential downsides of assuming a high, even complete correlation, of their contents with good scholarship – isn't this what we tend to do? Could you please explain this aspect a bit more?".

"Well, Alex, I'm sorry, but this might turn out to be a lecture for you… But the hierarchy of journal outlets is neatly connected to the broad issue of the ever-intensifying instrumentalism in the academe, so it will be good to discuss that aspect, too. But let me first go and get our mugs refilled with some fresh coffee!".

Robin gets up and walks to the service counter to buy more coffee. Robin says "Hi" to a colleague at the counter, also noticing that the café is still pretty tranquil, which facilitates the conversation with Alex.

Threats looming in the straightforward use of quantitative indicators

After returning to the table and having sipped the fresh coffee, Robin goes on, "Anyway, it is just that a central part of the current publish-or-perish condition and the performance measurement era is that many parties like to build and sustain a rigid hierarchy among research outlets. So, we talk about 'top-tier journals' or 'An A is an A mentality' [16] and so on. Even though there certainly must be several features that without question relate to the scholarly quality of the journals high in the hierarchy, such hierarchies still are social constructions, implicated by several factors, such as the impact factor and whether a journal is included in a well-established ranking system. As you know, in our area, there are, for instance, the British ABS, the Australian ABDC, the FT50 journal list, and the Finnish JUFO ranking" [17], [18].

"Sure, Robin, I'm familiar with all these rankings and acronyms… It's no easy task for anyone to avoid these any longer, at least in our subject field".

Robin takes another sip of coffee and continues. "Sure, the hierarchies of journals certainly have some fundamentals, which are helpful at least for one reason: They safeguard us a bit from the so-called 'predatory journals', which appear in plenty these days, and which are normally screened off from rankings and tend to have very low impact factors, if at all. There also exist some very helpful websites, which help researchers to avoid this type of journals, like the site 'Think.Check.Submit' [19]. But the issue is that many of the 'top-tier journals' over-emphasize such aspects of research as hard-nosed rigorousness, repeatability, and close linkage to existing research – with the cost of being overly critical of creative and innovative studies, which might look, for instance, difficult to repeat or cannot be neatly linked to existing research as they chart new territories [20]. We perhaps too easily believe that having published in a 'top-tier journal' also *guarantees* having exercised good scholarship, and even more worryingly, that publishing in other journals than these means automatically that the work is of lesser quality".

Alex nods in full agreement. "This seems to be exactly the case. It is taken for granted that publication in the most highly ranked journals – and very often *only* in them – indicates high-quality research. The rest being regarded just poor, in one way or another".

Robin goes on. "In addition, the perceived importance of established journal hierarchies makes us emphasize the quantitatively measurable publication success – luckily no longer only by counting mere publication volumes. This inherently lures us to play up the role of the publication game and downgrades the central importance of the goodness of the underlying scholarly process".

Once again, Alex steps in. “I hear you loud and clear! As researchers, we should always be mindful and concerned about the quality of the research process behind the conclusions”.

“Sure, Alex. We really should consider the publication outlet landscape in a more thorough and nuanced manner. Especially in choosing which journal to submit to, we should employ such criteria that relate more directly to good scholarly work rather than using merely technical journal hierarchy-based screening”.

“Good point, Robin, while we need those journal rankings to safeguard the academe, at least to some extent, from the predatory journals. So, just to be sure: Do you mean that these rankings should not be used so much for performance management purposes, because they offer too narrow a picture of the quality of scholarly work behind the surface? Is this what you are saying?”.

“Precisely!”.

“Okay then, Robin… But if we should not use publication rankings for comparing and evaluating researchers, what information should we use instead? I mean, if I, for example, should try to evaluate two different candidates of whom I have no prior knowledge for an open research-oriented position, should I not use such information at all? I would have thought those rankings were at least in some way informative”.

“Right, Alex, journal rankings and the kind of measures have some value, but they should indeed not be used in too straightforward a manner. We should avoid just passive, low-effort use of the various numerical ‘judgment devices’ that are available in plenty these days. The quality of research is a much more complicated matter than what the common hierarchies of publication outlets are able to signal. If the notion of scholarly quality is taken seriously, we need to acknowledge that quality cannot be fully predefined and captured by any of these judgment devices that we tend to routinely use. You might find the recent paper by David Bedford and his co-authors helpful on this topic [21]. We will instead need to *spend time* reading and thinking about the studies we are supposed to be evaluating, and make this part of evaluative work the *core* of it. It is not a sin to use the available judgment devices *alongside* this core, but they certainly should not dominate, or, even worse, replace our independent evaluative work [22]”.

“Ok, right, alongside... But how about the early career researchers, like doctoral students or post-docs like me? If we should not rely on journal rankings, how can we tell which journals to follow and perhaps submit to?” Alex asks.

“Good question. What I would suggest, as a *more* helpful proxy than the *naked* use of judgment devices like journal rankings, just to mention a simple one, is to look at the editor names and editorial boards to ponder how respected researchers serve these journals and from which universities. Additionally, if possible, it would be greatly beneficial to discuss the quality of the review processes of the journals in question with experienced, trusted colleagues while scanning the journal landscape. You see, several journals may seem currently ‘small’ when compared to other journals, but they may be investing in a long-term spirit to develop a high-quality, committed editorial board and have adopted a very serious scholarly mode in their peer review processes. Often these ‘smaller’ journals are outlets where some of the most innovative, perhaps out-of-the-box ideas can be published, and therefore these should not be neglected straightforwardly out of hand” [23].

“Those sound like valid points, Robin! And how do you see the value of rankings and accreditations of universities? Many universities these days seem to value such things quite much”.

“Well, Alex, all rankings, including accreditations to universities or their programs, have rather similar upsides and downsides. They can play a reasonable role in the stage of ‘mapping the landscape’. However, one of their downsides includes myopic ‘gamesmanship’ by fiddling with

the figures or making dysfunctional organizational or process changes to achieve a better ranking or accreditation. Hence, all parties should be careful, even cautious, in the current ranking-based culture" [24].

Robin continues, still in the lecturing mode, "When evaluating competing candidates for a position, such 'mapping of the landscape' would encompass, first of all, whether they have any publications, and if they have, how many, where they are published, and how respected are those forums. Additionally, in such mapping, we could look at the number of citations in various indexes, such as Google Scholar or Scopus. While such analysis is completely technical and secretarial by nature, that is still an understandable part of evaluative processes these days, especially when the number of candidates is high. But I must very strongly stress, *only* in the mapping phase. All these judgment devices should always be used very cautiously".

Alex nods in agreement.

"But right next comes the most important caveat", Robin explains. "This mapping of the landscape should never replace the active, autonomous reading and evaluation of the works themselves, but only support the start of it. All judgment devices, so popular today, are easily too technical and distant from the very purpose, contents, and deeper meaning of each piece of research to be valid for any really serious scholarly evaluation".

"Robin, so you say we should not be hasty, but always familiarise ourselves carefully with the content of the research before drawing any too far-reaching conclusions regarding the quality of the research, or researchers for that matter?".

"Yeah, Alex, that's most certainly what I intend to get across! We can imagine cases where one candidate has a larger number of publications in journals, even in rather respected ones, while another has just a few. So, based on mere bibliographical information, the former might be favoured. However, a careful look at the contents of the publications may reveal that the latter has published some notably more original, innovative, and exciting work than the former, likely with higher scholarly ambition and associated risks. When ambitions and risks are higher, scholarly work normally takes more time and, in the case of most innovative works, there may be many kinds of obstacles to getting them published – perhaps just for these reasons, a smaller number of studies in the CV".

"Indeed, Robin!".

Robin elaborates further. "However, of course, we must keep in mind, Alex, that any expert judgment may have subjective biases. But it is precisely these judgments that experts are supposed to do, yet supporting them by arguing for their views in a scholarly manner. Would we cease our evaluations on the bibliographical summary level, the administrative secretaries could do all the work, like Trevor Hopper pointed out [25]. We can support the sustainable academe only if we do not let the overly technical-only approach hijack the evaluative processes any further".

Alex smiles and says. "Many thanks for taking the time to give this 'lecture' for me, I appreciate it! This sounds very reasonable and something that I could easily accept and follow. I like the idea of using the available judgment devices alongside for 'mapping the landscape', but stop it there. But could you please elaborate more on how I should decide about which publication forums should be considered as 'respected' ones? You already mentioned some examples of proxies that might be useful for such evaluation work, like who the journal editors are and who is sitting on the editorial board. In addition, you mentioned the quality of the review process. Are all of these equally important? And would you say that these are the most important ones, or are there others as well that should be considered?".

"Well, Alex, I already mentioned some of these… Is there more to it…? Of course, there is the most natural one, which I missed mentioning previously: Reading a sample of papers published in the journal considered – this is very important, too! In addition, we should not just rely on what is

formally stated on journals' websites, since they often include commercial nonsense, even intentionally misleading text, like in the 'predatory journals'. What else is there…? Well, you can always try journals through your submissions, too, but that should, in my view, only be done in case the basic pre-tests you can carry out have been passed".

Alex nods his head again and then says, "All these hints sound like helpful ones for early career researchers, in particular. Overall, your suggestions relate to resisting the taken-for-granted approach of doing your research in the reverse order – letting it be driven by publication outlet target right from the start of the process. Fair enough, but… Given how strong such a tendency these days is, I'm wondering how researchers, especially in their early career stage, could become sufficiently motivated to fight back. And if they would like to do so, how can they get the resources and opportunities for it? Can they afford to indicate such resistance?".

"What wonderful questions, Alex, many thanks! Let's now turn to discussing at a more practical level what all our recent exchanges might entail and how they could be translated into some *sustainable* strategies and everyday practices of researchers".

Researchers' opportunities for adopting a non-instrumentalist position

"Yes, let's do that, Robin! Because, even if I would like to follow your guidance and stay on the path of good scholarship, the constant sense of urgency created by the 'system' to crank out publications can sometimes feel quite overwhelming – they tend to push me towards instrumentalist habits. So, yes, I would like to hear your opinion on how to challenge and even avoid those kinds of thinking models and habits. For example, there is constant competition between us researchers, especially those who do not have permanent positions yet, regarding how we look in the eyes of others. Therefore, we need to try to build up an impressive and convincing profile of ourselves as 'performers', and perhaps it is better to do it sooner rather than later if we wish to advance in our academic careers. This is something that Courtois and her co-authors stress in their recent article [26]. Could it be that the tendency in many universities to favour article-based doctoral dissertations over monographs is one of the symptoms of increasing instrumentalism, simultaneously feeding it, too? So, it would be great to hear your thoughts on how an early career researcher like me could cope with these challenges of everyday practice".

Robin nods eagerly and says, "Okay, let's go for it! But this is yet another tough question, of course. Academic labour markets are, these days, part of the publish-or-perish culture, and therefore, myopic evaluation of scholars is pertinent, unfortunately. Those who wish to resist this tendency must carefully ponder how to favourably combine surviving under short-term performance pressures and still have a chance to entertain good, meaningful scholarship. Luckily, there exist some strategies that should help to alleviate such tension. By the way, regarding the paper by Courtois and others, their notion of "conscious performer" is relevant here – I kind of like it, but to me it falls a bit short when considering what we would need in the current worrying situation. And I think your comment on the increasing move to article-based dissertations is part of the problem. Sorry, Alex, but another lecture may be just about to start…".

Alex smiles subtly, a glint in the eyes suggesting curiosity to hear more. "I kind of like your 'lectures', so please go ahead".

Robin goes on. "This issue is particularly complicated. In short, I think the sustainable solution means finding a true *scholarly identity and integrity* [27] of your own, where you are carrying out serious research which, in due course, is supposed to lead to publications, yet helps you in avoiding rush and making concessions to myopic instrumentalism. Such a research approach assumes, which I believe can also be substantiated, that the values and

habits inherent in good scholarship are not only healthy for the academe but also a successful strategy in the long run for a talented and motivated scholar. So, I think there is hope!".

Robin elaborates further. "At least the following two things are key to making such a strategy work. One, referring to our prior exchange above, researchers need to *avoid the publication-driven mindset*, but instead opt for a well-motivated research question driven one. Thereby, they can avoid becoming instrumentalist researchers. Second, I'd advise the early-career researchers, in particular, to be *picky regarding where they work*. They will need to look for places where they can anticipate getting support for their serious, no-rushing approach to conducting research – and not only that, but also where they could get an inspiring environment to carry out studies of genuine interest to them. Academic units in various parts of the world differ greatly in these regards".

With crossed arms, Alex responds. "Yeah… I agree with the first point, but regarding the second one, it sounds like early-career researchers would be the main target of your set of advice. It seems to assume that young, talented, and motivated scholars would be able to choose from different options regarding their workplace just like that. As if they could be as picky as they wish regarding whom and where they want to work. Is this what you are saying, or did I misunderstand you somehow? Isn't it rather so that, in particular, the experienced researchers who already know the system, including its pitfalls, should take more responsibility and start guiding the more junior out of the instrumentalist mode?".

"Excellent points, Alex! Firstly, true, there are many real-life conditions with early career researchers, perhaps more than with others, which may limit their options in choosing their work environment. But keeping this place aspect in mind is still very important since real-life conditions tend to be changeful and changeable, too. In addition, distant online working opportunities may offer more new options today. Secondly, most certainly, all this critique against instrumentalist tendencies in the current academe applies to all of us! Thinking of the established senior academics, unfortunately, it is likely difficult to make us change our attitudes, the way we run our research processes, or our supervisory approaches, unless we first 'wake up' ourselves regarding the huge risks instrumentalism poses to genuine scholarship in this publish-or-perish era. That recent paper by DeMott and others I mentioned earlier develops an important argument about how it is precisely the early-career researchers who are, after all, in the most likely position to represent resistance to instrumentalism and therefore represent an avenue for change to the better. I agree with them but believe we should say something more to move forward in that vein [28]. If early career scholars still more thoroughly realized the crucial importance of the firmly non-instrumentalist mindset, all that would sound even better".

Alex takes a deep breath and exhales slowly as if trying to absorb the information. "I see where you're coming from, but still […] Why not target the critique primarily to the more senior scholars, the ones with more power to influence things in academia?".

Now it's Robin's turn to look a bit desperate. "Alex, I'm afraid doing that would not play out very well, unfortunately. I have personal experience of this from the last 20-odd years, when I have increasingly raised these concerns in my writings, presentations, teaching, supervision, and discussions – you should know some of that… I have quite many times gotten feedback in the vein of me being an old-fashioned idealist, who has become a bit 'left behind' as to how we should think and act in the academe these days […]".

Alex looks a bit surprised. "Really? Is that so…?".

"After all, Alex, you see, many of the currently leading, and therefore influential, seniors may well have made their success through having learned not only how to be solid researchers but also how to play the publication game fluidly. That said, of course, we are still allowed to *hope all* researchers will pay attention to calls like this and start critically

reflecting on their scholarly mindsets and habits. I believe that critically examining these issues, as well as talking and writing on them, can be performative" [29].

Alex taps fingers lightly on the side of the coffee mug, then slightly nods. "Ok, perhaps you're right. However, I was, first of all, referring to the potential and willingness of the senior researchers to take a role in helping young researchers in their future careers. Many of them assume primarily the role of educating juniors on how to play smartly the publication game… In my view, it is a huge issue if there is no one around willing to inspire, guide, and support young researchers toward a good scholarship, in the sense you use the notion. During their early career, they might be unaware of any other option besides the straightforward path along the instrumentalist publication game. And if they knew better, how easily could they resist? Since there is intensive competition for even short-term academic positions with little long-term financial security, there is an omnipresent pressure driving towards instrumentalism. So, I don't think it is solely up to the early career researchers' willingness to find a route for being able to conduct meaningful research. In my opinion, experienced researchers and professors are needed, too. First, for informing about the existence of such an alternative, and second, for constructing the necessary foundations for acting accordingly".

Robin gets along. "Yes, I most certainly agree, and precisely therefore, I raised the idea of being picky regarding the place an early career researcher works. Juniors surely need guidance, support, and encouragement. And as you say, not just guidance of any kind!".

Without pausing, Robin continues. "You are so right, Alex. Indeed, early career researchers would need a *particular kind* of guidance, support, and encouragement – such that would help them avoid instrumentalism. The current tendency goes precisely the other way around: Seniors tend to focus on guiding youngsters towards just adopting the publish-or-perish culture, for instance, by celebrating publications rather than the contents of research pieces and prioritizing those who have a 'big publication CV' in position competitions – even in cases where that CV would be strong only nominally. It is not too difficult to learn to play the publication game to your short-term benefit – and too few care about anything else in the current academic climate. So, we should see the overall challenge as one in which both the juniors and the seniors should somehow be made to change their attitudes and start resisting the current regime in a *joint effort*. To make all of them realise that each researcher has at least a certain capacity of agency at their disposal [30]. What a puzzle indeed – not least, since also the challenge of 'embedded agency' is bound to apply to all of them. This is indeed a deeply systemic issue" [31].

Robin sends a glance at Alex and goes on. "I hope this helps a bit to understand my previous suggestion that early career researchers might, after all, be the easier target for the needed attitude change to start and get going. Much like what DeMott and others implied. Saying this does *not* in any way mean denying the primary *responsibility* of the senior researchers – the juniors are not to blame here. But early career researchers do not yet have their established position to lose. While it is certainly far from easy, they can at least *consider* walking away and find another place if they feel they only get guidance and support towards instrumentalist work, and they happen not to like it".

Suddenly, and against all odds, Alex exclaims. "Hey, wait a second! You said… "if they feel…" Are you serious? Do you think that young scholars are in such a position and possess so much power that they could just say to their first employer, "Hey, I don't feel good about how things are run in here, so I'll go elsewhere – have fun, and see you at the conferences"? Sure, you said it is far from easy, but still… Have I missed something in here? Do young scholars truly have so much power in academia? And further, how would such a move affect their future opportunities? Not to mention, what would it look like in their CV, and so forth…?".

"Tough questions, Alex… I'd say early-career researchers can have more power than they imagine. This is, in fact, also nicely put by DeMott and his numerous co-authors in their paper, demonstrating how early-career researchers can collaborate to mobilise their powers, also in feeding their joint resistance. I was so happy to see how the authors of that paper seem to have good seeds for the needed 'epistemic self-respect' [32] to follow their healthy scholarly aspirations. What I would stress more than they do is the *key* role played *by the determined non-instrumentalist mindset*, as already discussed today. And the same applies to the notion of "conscious performer" found and examined by Courtois and her co-authors: Such an image and role is understandable, among early-career researchers as well as others, and not so bad as such, but it just is insufficient. An effective change can only be accomplished if the non-instrumentalist aspect of the conscious performer's role is set *to the fore in a firm manner*. And this move kind of means everything, since without that… Well, we currently have the instrumentalist culture all around just because so many of us are such conscious performers who are *not* doing that… Being reflexive is not enough, since that leads these days all too often to adopting, perhaps initially with some resistance, the instrumentalist mindset – indeed, then after all, consciously".

"I very well see your point, Robin: Just being a conscious performer is not necessarily enough at all. But could you still explain more about the power of young scholars?".

Robin pauses for a second, then goes on. "Ok then. Let's take the example of accounting, our field. To be honest, there are not so many really promising junior candidates for early career positions in accounting, looking at the global picture. This is particularly true for qualitatively tuned accounting researchers: We have only a rather small number of promising young researchers there. Hence, they might well 'afford' to overcome the mere stage of learning to play the publication game and pursue instead the craft of a good scholarship. They can, at least in some instances, even choose between fighting their local established practices of research evaluation and moving to another place where the evaluation practices better fit their research agenda and mindset" [33].

"The picture I'm painting here is, of course, based on the assumption that not all senior academics in the whole world have 'sold their souls' at the altar of instrumentalism, so the non-instrumentalist place would still be somewhere out there to choose. And I am convinced this also is the actual case, at least for the time being", Robin closes yet another small-scale lecture.

"That sounds relieving indeed, Robin! I see your point – since the early career researchers are, after all, the future of the academe! We haven't yet dipped our feet too deep into the mess and might still have opportunities to find our way to conduct truly interesting, relevant, and meaningful research – out of true scholarly curiosity and in the spirit of academic freedom. Freedom that allows us to consciously choose the non-instrumentalist mindset. I believe many of us chose an academic career just because of this presumed freedom. Most certainly, that applies to me: Getting opportunities to conduct scholarly work under academic freedom was one big motivator for me to start my doctoral studies and consider an academic career. Would this freedom be stripped off, what would be left? What would then be the motivator? For sure, it cannot be the salary…". Alex smiles slyly and then continues. "That's why it is so encouraging when you stress how this optional path can also lead to good career prospects in the longer term. I also realize how important it is that we all recognize our agency and ethical duty to protect academic freedom".

Alex concludes. "It would, of course, help quite a lot if everyone who wishes to conduct research according to the principles of good scholarship could somehow find their way to such a mode of scholarly work, or if they have started that way, to keep on that track based on our discussion today. I think I now know what to do next with the paper I mentioned at the beginning of our discussion".

Robin looks happy and smiles. “Sounds very good! Good luck with your next steps with this paper and your research endeavours overall. Please make sure to take your time and avoid any hasty shortcuts in your research – rushing is nothing but a problem in conducting scholarly work!”.

“Thanks so much, Robin, I definitely will!”.

Epilogue

We humbly admit that the challenges the sustainability of the healthy academe faces these days are structural and huge, especially when the binding effects of our embedded agency (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998) are counted. Nevertheless, we have drafted this polemical and deliberately normative piece to help get the direction of academic work culture revised towards lesser instrumentalism. We define instrumentalism as “the degree to which an instrumentally rational understanding of research as a means of producing publications as items of countable performance dominates the entire research process from its very beginning” (Becker and Lukka, 2023, p. 1). Instrumentalism has, of course, its origins and trajectory, which can be traced and help us understand how it has gained its current prominence (for an overview, see Becker and Lukka, 2023). Today, there seem to be, roughly speaking, three types of academics with a view of the instrumentalist features of the ‘publish-or-perish regime’: Those who get frustrated and just leave the academe; those who stay, resist and fight back; and those who largely just adapt to the condition as a normalised matter of fact – some even actively promoting the instrumentalist mantra of needing to score high along the numerous quantitative indicators. As we worry that the proportion of the last-mentioned group continues to grow, this piece aims to adjust the proportions of these groups in favour of the second-mentioned one. We try to give them *hope* about the possibility of change by delving into some of the practical choices that any researcher eventually can and has to make during their research and publication processes. The presented discussion is intended to get across the following two arguments, which also form our contributions:

(1) Our first and most important claim concerns the researcher’s mindset, which has gone without sufficient attention in the research literature, despite its central importance. By mindset, we refer to the overarching mentality of researchers regarding their work (Humphrey and Gendron, 2015; Becker and Lukka, 2023). We argue that adopting a non-instrumentalist mindset is fundamentally critical. Without it, research risks becoming instrumentalist by default. At the heart of this mindset is a fundamental question: Which comes first – intending to do serious research or get published? The paper explores how mindset affects the entire research process, including the way researchers engage with journal review processes.

(2) Our second claim is the assertion that researchers can, at least to some extent, choose their mindset, i.e. they have agency, capacity for action, in that regard. This is, of course, a necessary complement to the first claim. It positions researchers as intentional agents, always with some agentic resources at their disposal, not merely as pre-determined products of the publish-or-perish environment [34]. While the dominant critical literature tends to frame researchers as caught between conflicting pressures in a rather helpless manner, we believe this neglects an important aspect: That many researchers could act differently if only they recognized the burning need as well as space for their own agency. We argue that believing there is no agentic room for manoeuvre regarding instrumentalism is one example of “mauvaise foi” (bad faith), one of the key notions of Jean-Paul Sartre’s existentialism (Sartre, 1993). This notion refers to denying our own opportunities for choice, thereby also trying to avoid our own responsibility. Our paper

seeks to make both the need and space of our agency more visible, showing how deeply harmful the instrumentalist mindset can be, and also offering – not only theoretically but also in practical terms – hope that a different path is possible.

Hence, we maintain that all researchers, although there are certainly always boundaries to it (Dany *et al.*, 2011), both the more junior and the more senior ones, have at least some degree of agency at their disposal, which is often overlooked these days. This claim is nicely supported by DeMott *et al.* (2024), but more prominently than that paper does, we argue for the importance of a firm mindset that leans on pursuing a good scholarship – referring to a particular craft, at the heart of which are the skills of serious reading, pondering, (typically) empirical work, reflection, and writing (Mills, 1959; Sennett, 2008) [35]. We suggest that the typically adopted oscillating position of a conscious performer, as observed by Courtois *et al.* (2020), is not enough in the current worrying condition of the academe – again, a firmer non-instrumentalist mindset, with fuller epistemic self-respect, are needed. If the currently dominant versions of conscious performer were enough, we would not be in the current mess with instrumentalism in academic research.

The paper suggests that resistance to change might well come from early-career researchers, while fully recognising they are by no means responsible for the emergence of the current instrumentalist culture. While early-career researchers are not in any formal positions of power, they are, after all, the future of the academe and have not necessarily yet fixed their mindsets to the instrumentalist mode. However, we acknowledge that their agency may feel strongly framed by the typical demanding promotion criteria, like tenure track systems, of today. However, referring to the analysis of Dany *et al.* (2011), academic careers tend to be both bounded and boundaryless. It is particularly for this reason that we believe their emancipation is of utmost importance. The dialogue stresses the crucial importance of adopting a non-instrumentalist mindset – which any researcher can choose at any career stage – and being very careful regarding at which universities and departments they carry out their doctoral studies and continue their career. While instrumentalism is widespread, not all departments and supervisors are equally firmly and deeply subsided in this unfortunate phenomenon. There are academic communities offering hope in this regard.

In urging for good scholarship instead of instrumentalism, we are not asking for anything miraculous but suggest that it 'only' means systematic research work, one day after another, in which we would routinely and firmly follow high, solid research integrity, which avoids the traps of easy shortcuts and 'reverse-order instrumentalism'. Such research is conducted in the belief of the intrinsic value of running our research processes thoughtfully and carefully, driven by scholarly curiosity and well-motivated, meaningful research questions. Such research is driven by passion regarding the contents of the study instead of seeking primarily to get the work published. Importantly, journal publications of high quality will then be the eventual outcomes of the process, not the primary reasons for it. The researcher following this path will also need a decent, healthy amount of epistemic self-respect to defend their position and arguments, as long as they are warranted on a solid epistemic or practical basis. We set our hope on gradually getting more examples of research units that fight back instrumentalism by developing and sheltering this type of research work culture (Van Houtum and Van Uden, 2022). Enacting good scholarship in such a way would, in the spirit of "performative ontology" (Gibson-Graham, 2008), mark notable steps towards a more sustainable academe, where instrumentalism eventually ceases to be the dominant take, and the need for carrying out as meaningful research as possible would gain the importance it deserves.

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Notes

[1.] Our notion of instrumentalism corresponds to the definition of Becker and Lukka (2023), p. 1: "[…] instrumentalism: the degree to which an instrumentally rational understanding of research as a means of producing publications as items of countable performance dominates the entire research process from its very beginning".

[2.] The piece is based on long-term personal experience as active scholars (hence, experience-based and "auto") and numerous discussions within the author team. The very discussion in the form drafted here is a selected and narrated collection of ideas having emerged in these introspective and critical exchanges (hence, "fiction") (for comparison, see Davis and Ellis, 2008). While empirical in this special way, our text is, however, essentially a critical, polemical and deliberately normative thought piece, intended to feed a fundamental change in the scholarly culture now geared around the publish-or-perish regime.

[3.] This paper is hugely inspired by Ruth Hines's seminal paper (Hines, 1988), which was published in dialogue form, as well as the thought-provoking suggestions of Grey and Sinclair (2006).

[4.] The fictional characters Alex and Robin obviously represent different seniorities and degrees of experience as researchers. We are aware that such differences entail differing 'temporal contextualization' for them. Due to evolving conditions of academic life, this may affect, for instance, what researchers value in academic work, how they tend to practice it or how they perceive the viable paths to success within academia. However, the burning need to follow the principles of good academic work and to fight instrumentalism, for which this paper argues, should be seen as independent of the seniority or experiential background of researchers.

[5.] Section titles are added in the written draft on the discussion to enhance readability.

[6.] FT-50 is an often-used ranking of journals in the business studies area, run by the *Financial Times*.

[7.] Bedford *et al.* (2023).

[8.] Messner (2015) provided an important analysis of the opportunities and threats that intensifying research orientation brings to the academe. He suggests "research orientation without regrets" – a balanced approach that manages to be research-active without sacrificing the potential for diversity in research and relevance from the practitioner's viewpoint.

[9.] DeMott *et al.* (2024).

[10.] On the crucial difference between these two orders of carrying out research processes, see Table 1 in Becker and Lukka (2023) and the related text to it.

[11.] See, in particular, Alvesson *et al.* (2017), Becker and Lukka (2023) and Bedford *et al.* (2023).

[12.] Courtois *et al.* (2020), p. 657, citing and translated from Berry (2009), p. 227.

[13.] See Ramassa *et al.* (2024) regarding how short-term publication opportunities often drive research topic choices, indicating worrying goal displacement.

[14.] See Kuhn (1962).

[15.] Here, we bypass any serious analysis of the broader social implications of these choices, relating to how research communities work – for instance, the so-called "tribe behaviour" among them (see Lukka, 2010). This is only to streamline our storyline, not intended to imply that such aspects were not important.

[16.] See Hiebl (2023), which looks at the cultural differences between the reliance of such hierarchic mentality.

[17.] ABS, ABDC and JUFO are journal rankings, just like the FT-50 list. Similarly as the FT-50 list, ABS and ABDC are focused on the business studies area, while JUFO covers all scholarly disciplines.

[18.] It is worth noting that the wide-spread use of acronyms like these is not only handy in use but also yet another symptom of the instrumentalist publish-or-perish era that we currently are living in: Acronyms transform things into "facts" taken for granted and they lose much of their cognitive meaning, reducing them to a bunch of letters (Marcuse, 1964, 97-98).

[19.] See https://thinkchecksubmit.org/.

[20.] See Alvesson *et al.* (2017) and Bedford *et al.* (2023).

[21.] See Bedford *et al.* (2023), which sheds light on the notable conceptual and practical challenges to evaluate the quality of scholarly research. On judgement devices, see Karpik (2010).

[22.] As Hopper (2016) argued, in that case, scholarly evaluation is diminished to a clerical or secretarial scoring task. For that matter, in the future (if not already today), it is likely that AI systems will be tasked with this work, leading to an even further distancing of scholarly evaluation in practice from the very scholars themselves.

[23.] One of the most telling examples of this phenomenon is the destiny of the seminal Ball and Brown (1968) article. It was rejected from *The Accounting Review*, despite its huge innovative potential – or perhaps just because of it – but published in *Journal of Accounting Research*, which at that time was still a young journal, the standing of which was nowhere near the 'almighty' *The Accounting Review*. See the very helpful retrospective by Ball and Brown (2014).

[24.] A quote from the interview of Alan in DeMott *et al.* (2024), p. 608, is telling about the trap posed by university rankings: "To be honest, I chose my school based on university rankings and prestige. I was crazy. There is something to think about here how our sense of place is increasingly dominated by these different rankings, salaries, prestige, etc. These things have a great seductive power which lures you in and which are difficult to resist. But they are also all made up. They are fake. […] People are trying to score 4* hits. Most people don't write what they really think or what they would like to write".

[25.] Hopper (2016).

[26.] Courtois *et al.* (2020).

[27.] By identity we mean "the self as reflexively understood by the person", Giddens (1991), p. 53. By integrity we refer to "the quality of being honest and having strong moral principles that you refuse to change" (Cambridge Dictionary).

[28.] DeMott *et al.* (2024).

[29.] See the notion of performative ontology in Gibson-Graham (2008) and Lukka and Becker (2023). Once we get thinking, talking and writing realise at the level of action, a seed of a new reality is formed and that can start spreading further.

[30.] By agency we refer to capacity for action, i.e. "the ability to take action or to choose what action to take" (Cambridge Dictionary).

[31.] Embedded agency refers to agents' actions being conditioned, at least to some extent, by their physical and social context because agents unavoidably are part of their environment. This is an important challenge in any attempt to shake established institutions, see Emirbayer and Mische (1998).

[32.] We thank the prior Editor of *QRAM*, Lukas Goretzki, for mentioning the notion of "epistemic respect", citing Krevl and Spicer (2022), and suggesting the notion of "epistemic self-respect" for us in editorial correspondence. By this notion, we refer to conducting research to the meaningfulness of which we genuinely believe, intention and ability to take received feedback into consideration on a serious scholarly basis and intention and ability to defend the position and arguments presented against critique as long as they can be warranted on a scholarly basis.

[33.] See and compare Malsch and Tessier (2015). We share their worries and add to their findings, in particular, by stressing not only the need, but also the opportunities, for early career researchers to be seriously reflective about what kind of research mindset they choose to accept as ethical and worth entertaining.

[34.] Alvesson *et al.* (2017) insisted that researchers tend to underestimate their agentic degrees of freedom, suggesting that most of them have more power that they realise (p. 139).

[35.] As stressed by Bechky and Davis (2024), such skills cannot be meaningfully outsourced to modern information technologies, like generative artificial intelligence, however, tempting their usage might appear.

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