

Yes, academic research can improve
corporate social & environmental practices:
Some examples, and increasing the odds

Mike Toffel (@miketoffel)
Harvard Business School

QUASI Seminar Series @ April 16, 2021

Yes, research can improve corporate social and environmental practices

Some examples

- King & Lenox “Industry Self-Regulation without Sanctions” led the chemical industry to improve its *Responsible Care* program
- Pacala & Socolow: climate stabilization wedges widely referred to by policymakers
- Eccles, Ioannou, & Serafeim: sustainability alpha widely referenced in sustainability finance practitioners
- Levine, Toffel, & Johnson: OSHA inspections reduce injuries referenced by OSHA director, Congressional testimony, Federal Register
- Short, Toffel & co-authors: improving social auditing practices referenced by brands & social auditors

Not just peer reviewed work: Engagement as experts

Beyond sustainability...balanced scorecard, innovator’s dilemma, Milton Friedman, Jensen & Murphy, etc.

Some examples of debunking

- Pucker: “Overselling Sustainability Reporting”
- King & Pucker “The Dangerous Allure of Win-Win Strategies”
- Bergquist et al. “Understanding and Overcoming Roadblocks to Environmental Sustainability”

Beyond sustainability...Simonsohn, Nelson, & Simmons’s dataColada.org; Goldfarb & King “Scientific apophenia in strategic management research: Significance tests & mistaken inference”, etc.

4Rs to improve the odds that research improves social/env practices...

R1: Relevant

- Pick topics that scholars *and managers/policymakers* care about--or should care about
- Ground hypotheses in scholarship *and reality*
- Managerial implications ought not be an afterthought
- See: Toffel “[Enhancing the Practical Relevance of Research](#)” (2016 POM)

R2: Robust

- Too much empirical analysis is done poorly
 - ❖ Construct validity, identification
 - ❖ Methods too unsophisticated or overly sophisticated
 - ❖ Unstated assumptions: make explicit, defend, sensitivity
- [DataColada.org](#)
- [Omitting asterisks](#) isn't the solution
- We *must* improve training of PhD students + faculty

R3: Readable

- We wrote like normal people before academia, and then most of us decide it's better to speak in jargon (e.g., legitimacy, endogeneity, scientific apophenia)
- This does not make us look smarter.
- It makes our work inaccessible to scholars outside our narrow field, to the media, and to practitioners.
- *Science* “Research in Science journals” + *NEJM* “Perspectives” vs *SMJ* managerial summaries

R4: Reachable (the last mile problem)

- Crossovers: HBR, SMR, SSIR, Rutgers Bus Rev, etc.
- Op-eds: NYT, Guardian, The Hill, Grist...
- Trades: OHS Online, EHS Today, E&E News...
- Faculty blogs: [Global Supply Chain](#), [Operations Room](#)
- Bridging conf's: [EPA+scholars](#), [Managers+scholars](#)
- Webinars & podcasts: [HBR IdeaCast](#), [Climate Rising](#)
- Microsites: [HBS Working Conditions in Supply Chains](#)
- LinkedIn, Twitter
- B-schools & institutes should invest in this