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Abstract

Seen through European lenses, American academia is struggling with a disconnection between scientific rigor and pragmatic relevance that has taken hold during the last decades within management and organization studies. The implications are serious: a potential loss of relevance to business and society; a domination of stand-alone-constructs that neglect their intellectual heritage; a limited dissemination of research findings to a relatively small audience; and the institutionalization of intellectual homogeneity within a self-supporting academic community. I explore some of the reasons behind this development and argue that change can only emerge from within academia itself. My hope is that current developments within leading journals and academic institutions might lead to a different future where new voices and a more global outlook will encourage a redoing of American pragmatism at its best.

Keywords

reinvent pragmatism, scientific rigor, relevance, disconnection, American academia

As a scholar who works in the area of organizational identity, I am always fascinated by any conversation that contrasts how we see ourselves versus how others see us—and how that conversation takes on a different tone, depending on where it takes place and who is participating. One of the distinctive benefits of being an academic is the opportunity to interact with many people outside of your own culture, many of whom influence who you are becoming as a scholar. As a PhD student in organization studies in the early 1980s, my first exposure to American academia was experiencing how leading thinkers such as March, Simon, Scott, Weick, Martin, and so on had a profound influence in Scandinavia—raising the bar for theoretical and empirical work at business schools. We studied and debated their books and used them as sources of inspiration for our own work. Compared with the European traditions of the time, they were imaginative and clear, thoughtful and relevant, and helped a generation of European scholars to escape from the strain of critical Marxism and arcane postmodernism. But I also learned about American management thinking through the "practice gurus" who swept through business schools and the consulting world offering "excellence," "balanced scorecards," and "reengineering" and who used convincing frameworks, persuasive numbers, and compelling stories to leave their mark. And last but not the least, I started to attend conferences in the United States, first of all the Academy of Management conference, meeting some of my heroes and heroines in person. At that time there were only two or three of us usual suspects from Copenhagen Business School. Today at AoM CBS is one of the best-represented business schools outside the United States in terms of participants and papers presented. So generations of Scandinavian scholars have indeed decided to come to America and become familiar with American management thinking during the past 25 years.

My first impression of American academia was that it was all rather overwhelming. American academia in action within management and organization studies, especially as represented at AoM, was bigger, faster, and flashier—offering a blend of outstanding key-note speakers, well-crafted papers, and an obsession with the delivery of (sometimes very minor) findings through cascades of arguments, mystifying statistics, and strong assertions about the importance of the work! It was both fascinating and intimidating in its force, combining iconic business schools and leading journals that celebrated the best and the brightest. Yet it also demonstrated to me that academic hierarchy existed on both sides of the Atlantic. Certainly the competition for fame and fortune was conducted with more intensity, tenacity (and volume) in America, but then the gains and losses involved seemed somehow bigger than in most European countries, particularly the small ones like my own Denmark. Taking a closer look with the benefit of experience and hindsight, I find that American academia today seems to be torn between two putatively different modes of thinking: pragmatism and

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scientific rigor. And it seems to have a very hard time reconciling the two.

On one hand, American academia has a strong tradition of home-grown pragmatism going back to the late 1800s, seeing theorizing as an integral part of practice. Pragmatism has fostered curious and open-minded explorations of life in organizations and stimulated generations of theorists, researchers, and teachers who have learned from the intelligence of practice rather than seeing themselves as intelligent theorists telling practitioners what to do. This ability to develop new theories and concepts, unrestricted by centuries of inhibiting philosophy (as many European countries are), has enabled Americans to conceive the spirit of the postindustrial age in ways that are more compelling and imaginative than most of their European counterparts. Only an American theorist would conceive, for instance, of "The Technology of Foolishness" (March, 1976). That sort of thinking simply would never have appeared in the European oeuvre. The virtue of the pragmatist tradition has been its ability to address issues in organizations that matter to people and point to different ways of organizing, either through new theoretical frameworks or through conceptual provocation. A solid respect for empirical practice historically has been combined with the ability to coin a phrase and tell a compelling story. The downside of pragmatism, however, is an apparent obsession with everything that *might* work, which has been taken to an extreme outside of academia by some of the more popular guru-style thought leaders.

On the other hand, it seems to me that American academia is pursuing a kind of scientific rigor that does not emerge from social sciences but is instead imitating methods and ways of theorizing from the natural sciences as some sort of high aspiration. Careful testing of elaborate hypotheses goes hand in hand with a strong focus on dissemination of findings through leading journals, often requiring a highly standardized way of arguing, theorizing, and presenting data. It is as if some imagined institution of "science" has forced a logic on organization and management studies—a logic that assesses the quality of research and researchers along uniform and quantifiable, if somewhat artificial, dimensions. When it works, the pursuit of scientific rigor enables American scholars to formulate specific concepts and insights that generate new landmarks in our thinking about and knowledge of organizations. When it fails, or is force-fit, however, it creates a single-minded obsession with adapting organizational phenomena to an "accepted" scientific form, resulting in many studies of rather minor topics, which can be tested in many possible and sometimes irrelevant ways and reported in a 40-page manuscript. As noted by Van de Ven (2007), it may well be that a gap in a field exists not because it is waiting to be studied, but because it is utterly unimportant and uninteresting.

Sometimes pragmatism and scientific rigor work in tandem. They blend and create unique accomplishments that are relevant and rigorous, interesting, and insightful. The dominating influence of U.S. thinkers in our field is certainly not just a reflection of size and easier access to primary distribution channels (the "elite" journals). It illustrates the profound contributions made by American scholars through the decades and the American origin of many of the key constructs within management and organization studies. But at other times, the demand for institutionalized scientific rigor dominates and transforms academia in ways that could eventually lead to a path of self-constructed diminishment, not only for American organization studies but also all of its followers around the world. Such a path is in my view created by the following:

The loss of relevance. The debate between rigor and relevance has taken place within the Academy of Management for some years now and certainly in the pages of this journal, where several leading scholars have raised the issue of the loss of relevance and questioned the future of organization studies. I will only add that when the push for scientific rigor exceeds the tipping point, and the balance promoted by pragmatism is lost, the result becomes excruciatingly detailed studies of very minor issues that are generated within small scholarly communities in highly specialized areas. The extraordinary pressure to be able to publish in A journals very early in one's career often prevents engagement with practice through field studies or in-depth longitudinal data collection. Instead lab studies, surveys of students, and the construction of large databases from the Web are alternatives that can be managed and reported within the four walls of the office—or the cubicle—even if they might generate big studies of little questions.

Stand-alone constructs. Part of the adapted scientific paradigm is the race for first-mover advantage and the invention of "new" constructs. As a result, we witness most leading journals asking for profound new theoretical contributions. Making a new theoretical contribution is a major accomplishment and, if done properly, takes the researcher through decades and, at times, centuries of previous theoretical development, exploring and perhaps reinterpreting its conceptual heritage. Yet today there is little time to do so, and the result is that many new constructs are presented as stand-alone, having almost no connection to their theoretical heritage or the nomological network of other related ideas. On the contrary, many young scholars cease to go back more than 10 years in time and quickly learn to cite the main A-journal references, never going beyond them. This tendency is probably the biggest difference with European academics, as Europeans put a strong emphasis on knowing and building on the grand thinkers, returning to the origin of paradigms—so much so that they sometimes do not return to the current issues. When they do it well, however, they go very deep and generate some profound insights. As a result, Americans develop much more pragmatic midrange constructs for which they can claim ownership, but only until the next new construct pops up—which is perhaps why we see so many fads in American management writing.

Limited dissemination of research. In the very old days the caricature of a social science researcher was someone sitting in (mostly his) ivory tower, reading books and engaged in deep thinking. In reality, they were traveling the world, engaging practitioners, and exposing themselves to other thinkers. Later on, social science moved out into the field, whether the field was street corner societies or decision processes in companies. Some findings showed up in books, others in journal articles, and still others in compelling case stories, which each in their different ways contributed to knowledge. Today it seems that scientific rigor can only be assured and taken seriously when a study appears in a very limited range of so-called A journals. There is little wrong with the journals, as such. Many of them are excellent, reporting some very interesting developments. But something is wrong, I fear, when a research community treats these journals as the only proof point of quality, limiting the attention to other journals, let alone to books and other viable outlets. Of course, there is a high level of quality control in the highly elaborate review system, but other journals have reviewers too, just as the better publishers undertake a close scrutiny of their books. (And let's remember that peer review sometimes limits the degree to which new and truly different ideas can be admitted into a community because a journal's reviewers are often the same people who might be closely guarding their ownership of terms and constructs associated with their names and work).

This narrow focus on A-journal publication generates several problems. First, it prevents researchers who, for whatever reason, are not able to force-fit their contribution into the highly standardized journal format and, therefore, are not taken seriously—and cited—among their peers. Second, sheer calculation makes it obvious that only a very limited range of scholars will have the opportunity to publish in those journals, leaving a wealth of talent under the radar screen. Third, it creates a work of Sisyphus for young researchers. Every time they have published one A-journal publication, they must move on to the next project to justify themselves. Nothing else matters. Last but not the least, it prevents talented researchers from seeking other, larger audiences, perhaps even opening themselves to intensive interaction with practitioners, by writing books, more popular pieces, magazine contributions, and so on. As a telling example, my regular business column in a Danish business newspaper has about 80,000 readers, which raises a useful question for our field: What actually constitutes academic contribution and influence?

A homogeneous community. Seen from the outside, researchers are viewed as "spoiled" (perhaps justifiably). They focus mainly on their own thoughts and ideas and go to interesting places to meet and talk mainly to each other. I cannot help but agree with this criticism. Academia is indeed an extremely privileged profession, which can be creative, interesting, and fun. Given such opportunity for engagement with a wider world, why then are academics so bad at listening and having conversations with outsiders, at engaging in creative exchange of ideas with people outside of their own field, and exploring new territories together with people from the world of practice, let alone inviting managers, politicians, and NGO's into debates about how they experience life in and around organizations? Here, again we are victims of our institutions and our collective delusion that we must perform in highly predictable ways to be deemed a "success." We are at risk of building our own collective psychic prison.

So, if I am right in the least about some of the embedded risks for the future of management and organization studies, why has this disconnection between pragmatism and scientific rigor happened? Why are we as a field engaged in this apparently self-destructive crusade? Is it some sort of quest for legitimacy in having management and organizational studies compared with other sciences? As more and more research funding is allocated through thematic programs, are we increasingly competing with other sciences beyond the bounds of social sciences for the same money? Does it have something to do with university administrators with little research expertise and not being capable themselves to tell the difference between good and bad research? Instead, they rely on the journal system when deciding who will receive tenure and who will not? Counting and comparing A-journal hits is certainly easier than making individual assessments comparing different kinds of research contributions and scholars from different theoretical traditions and research paradigms. Is it the inability of faculty to stand up and defend different traditions when resources for research and positions get allocated within universities? Is it an assumption that the interaction with practitioners has been conquered by thought leaders and consulting agencies, which leaves academics to their own small audience? I doubt that it reflects the dreams and aspirations of many young researchers. I doubt that many editors are comfortable with having such devastating influence on the career of many of their colleagues. I doubt that many senior scholars will want to look back at a long life's achievement only in terms of articles published. But I am pretty sure that the ability to change this state of affairs will need to come from inside the management and organization studies field. Nobody else cares enough about our small world. There are many other professions and disciplines that are more than happy to replace us, when we make ourselves irrelevant and incomprehensible to anybody, including ourselves.

I also do see some willingness to try and change things, however. As a newly elected board member of the Academy of Management, I am lucky to be part of a strategy process that will take the Academy in an even more global direction and will open it to more creative and innovative ways of interacting within the Academy itself. Globalization poses other challenges for sure, but it does make it obvious that there is a big world outside the United States and Europe that holds many more perceptions about what is good research and what it takes to become an accomplished scholar. By the same token, an increasing number of A journals are becoming more experimental in their format, just as many Europe-based journals are becoming more rigorous in their quality and less intransigent about maintaining their traditions. The Internet and on-line access to journals makes distribution less of a concern and enables people to connect in new and innovative ways. These modern trends hold some promise of changing the perception of what it takes to produce scientific contribution and expand the range of legitimate publication channels to researchers inside and outside of the United States. But these trends will not necessarily reconnect us with pragmatism. Nor will they necessarily give greater emphasis to the importance of our theoretical heritage and the need to relate current constructs to those of the past. Maybe it is time to revisit the motto of one of the great American modernist architects, living at the same time as the early pragmatists, who stated that "form follows function" (Sullivan 1896). In the future, we should explore how loosening up the tight institutional form of scientific rigor may allow new functions for academia. Let us aim for a makeover of the academic forms that have become too rigorous and hope that this will reconnect form and function and stimulate a (re) development of the pragmatic function of academia that, at the end of the day, is the reason why management and organization studies exist. And here new functions of management research should not be coined as the "next-new-thing!" It should be a rethinking and not least a redoing of American pragmatism. Blended with European traditions and Asian heritage, it might enable researchers to engage and "intellectualize practice" (Dewey, cited in Eldridge 1998) as it unfolds in the age of globalization.

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Bio

Majken Schultz is professor at Copenhagen Business School and partner in The Reputation Institute. Her research interests are located at the interface between organizational culture, identity, and image, corporate branding, and reputation management. She has published numerous articles in international journals on these topics, such as *Academy of Management Review*, *Academy of Management Journal*, *Organization Studies*, *Harvard Business Review*, *European Journal of Marketing*, and *California Management Review.* Her most recent book is *Taking Brand Initiative: How Companies Can Align Strategy, Culture and Identity Through Corporate Branding* (with Mary Jo Hatch; Jossey-Bass, 2008). Other books are *The Expressive Organization* and *Organizational Identity* (with Mary Jo Hatch; Oxford University Press). She serves on several company boards and is a regular columnist in the local newspapers. She was elected to the Board of Governors for the Academy of Management in 2009.