

DIALOGUE

Of Fiction and Fraud: A Comment on Barry and Elmes' Article

Barry and Elmes (1997) address the issue of strategic management as a form of fiction, and they explore the challenges strategists face in making strategic discourse both "credible" and "novel." Their use of narrative theory to pose various research questions and to offer methodological suggestions for examining future shifts in the strategy field is insightful. My comment here does not gainsay their analysis or conclusions. It does, however, emphasize a wider implication of their basic theme. To wit, although other nonstrategists may be tempted to feel a tinge of scientific superiority in Barry and Elmes' admission that *all* strategies are fiction and *all* strategists are fictionalists, any such smugness on their part is misplaced. In truth, as a collection of discursive practices (Taylor, 1996), *all* science and *all* scientific writings are fiction. Moreover, the "rhetorical devices" and "rhetorical dynamics" that Barry and Elmes recognize as used by strategists to increase their credibility and "authorize" strategic discourse have been employed by scientists of *all* persuasions for well over 300 years.

The scientific article as we know it today first appeared in 1665, when the *Journal des Scavans* and *Philosophical Transactions* were founded (Knorr-Cetina, 1981: 133n). The standardization of the narrative devices to which Barry and Elmes refer (e.g., voice, perspective, ordering, and plots) dates back to the 1830s and 1840s, first appearing in German chemistry journals. It was during this period that scientific articles, using the narrative devices that Barry and Elmes discuss, initially acquired the canonical or ritual style we know today. A comparison of articles regularly appearing in the *Academy of Management Journal* with scientific papers of 100 years ago, for instance, reveals an almost identical narrative scheme. The plot line guiding their directional discourse is essentially the same: introduction, methods, results, discussion, tables, figures, and references. As Hoffmann (1995: 60) offers, the only real difference is the contemporary obligatory note thanking the National Science Foundation for financial support.

A wider implication of the Barry and Elmes theme that seems unstated (if not, at least, understated) is that the fiction they describe as comprising strategic discourse is pandemic throughout the sciences, including *all* areas constituting the Academy's divisional structure. Modern science, as codified in its end product—the scientific article—is, by and large, ritualized fiction. This fiction serves the rhetorical purpose of objectifying science and, thereby, authorizing science and scientific writers. It is this authority that not only makes strategic discourse "credible"

(to use Barry and Elmes' terminology) but legitimizes *all* scientific discourse.

Acknowledging this purpose, however, does not negate the inherent fraudulence being perpetuated. Consider a typical *Academy of Management Journal* article. Adhering to the conventional introduction/methods/results/discussion format, the author presents science as a logical and cumulative sequence of activities. This sequence flows from theoretical considerations presented in an introduction to data collection, to data manipulation, and, finally, to an assessment of the new data's contribution to prevailing knowledge (cf. Madigan, Johnson, & Linton, 1995: 430). In reality, of course, science is seldom, if ever, so neat. Plainly stated, by fictionalizing the nature of scientific thought, the scientific article in its orthodox form is pure fiction: a fraud (Medawar, 1964). Indeed, the institutionalized narrative devices of the contemporary scientific article not only conceal but actively misrepresent the thought processes that lead to scientific discoveries.

In particular, the pretenses that science is free of the "personal interests and situational contingencies" of researchers (Knorr-Cetina, 1981: 99) and that scientists are neutral observers who reserve all judgment of scientific evidence until a manuscript's discussion section are ludicrous. Virtually everyone conducting scientific work starts with some expectation about the anticipated outcome; thus, given this expectation, they judge certain observations relevant or irrelevant, choose or discard methods, and conduct specific studies rather than others (Medawar, 1964). Most of the obstacles and thought processes (imaginative and inspirational) occurring during this process, however, are excised from published accounts. What remains serves the rhetorical purpose of objectifying science, with no mention of wrong guesses, false leads, fortuitous circumstances, and plain serendipity. By convention, what appears in print is a sanitized, rationalized account that conforms to the ritual scientific schema (Madigan et al., 1995: 430). Whereas experienced colleagues may be able to discern the real story behind a published report, what is offered for public scrutiny mirrors the canonical style typical of scientific reporting—that is, a style that "favors an image of perfection" (Coleman, 1987: 1).

To be sure, Barry and Elmes' observations as applied to strategic discourse apply to *all* areas within the Academy's substantive domain. As is, however, the prevailing orthodox form presents an oversimplified (and inaccurate) view of science. Of concern is that the canonized form of scientific paper leaves little room for discussing the human side of science, prohibiting authors from talking about their work from a personal standpoint, from revealing what prompted their thinking, and from sharing the challenges they encountered in traveling the byways to publication.

Acknowledging that the modern scientific article is a fraud, in that it presents a misleading narrative of the thought processes and methods

producing scientific discoveries, suggests the need to consider alternative literary and linguistic practices for the communication of knowledge. Minimizing the discrepancy between "the facts as we know them and the facts as we report them" should be our goal. One suggestion toward this end is the simple use of discursive footnotes (Madigan et al., 1995). At present, authors seldom use such footnotes in either the Academy's *Journal* or *Review*. These footnotes, however, offer the possibility of creating a parallel text for disclosing idiosyncratic but important research considerations. A second suggestion is to encourage authors to provide observations on their own research. Such observations could not only provide insights into how an author's ideas developed, highlighting the actual flexibility required to do scientific work, but inspire ideas for further research.

In sum, Barry and Elmes are correct: strategic discourse is fiction, but, then again, we all are fictionalists in our own rhetorical world. Nonetheless, by not striving to offer a more faithful representation of what actually transpires in the research process, we compromise the very reason for doing research in the first place (Barabas, 1990: 121).

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