© Academy of Management Learning and Education, 2004, Vol. 3, No. 1, 92–98.

The Gift of Professional Maturity

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"There is nothing new in the world except the history you do not know."
—Harry S. Truman (Hillman, 1952: 81)

Among those relatively few academics who teach the history of management thought, there is little question that a course tracing the evolution of management thinking has a place in the training of our discipline's doctoral students. Yet, the intellectual history of management is neither widely taught nor generally considered a required competency for those students embarking upon an academic career. The fundamental question that naturally presents itself is "So what?" As someone who has been involved in the Academy of Management since October 6, 1971 (the date on my membership certificate), and who has for some 20 years taught a PhD seminar on the historical development of our discipline, I wish to offer a response to this question. The immediacy I feel in doing so emanates from a growing concern that as a discipline we are producing doctoral students who are largely illiterate as to our discipline's patrimony.

Everything we have—our language, our theories, our models, and our methodologies, not to mention our implicit values, our professional institutions, and our scholarly ways—comes from our inherited past. The widespread failure among these students (the future professorate) to understand that present management applications are quite literally what the past has made them is a failure to appreciate Isaac Newton's 1676 dictum (based on a 12th century aphorism by Bernard of Chartres) that each succeeding generation stands on the shoulders of the giants that have gone before it (see Merton, 1965). More disturbing, perhaps, is that it also is akin to mass ingratitude toward our discipline's progenitors, who are often caricatured by these same students as troglodytes whose accomplishments have little relevance for modern practice. The truth is, as a profession incorporate, we have done a very poor job of providing our students with an understanding and appreciation of our discipline's intellectual history. The evolution of management thought is taught at the professional level in only a few doctoral programs. As a result, we have failed in conveying the nature of who we are as a profession and how we got to be here.

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For those who study our discipline's roots, it is clear that to fully understand the contemporary management enterprise in its broadest sense, one must also understand it historically (Bedeian, 1998). Over the past 125 years, management scholars have sought explanations for workplace behavior and overall corporate success. Efforts toward these ends have been traditionally judged on their originality and importance for the discipline as a whole. To render such judgments, however, it is essential for one to be familiar with what others have said, done, and written. For this reason, if for no other, history should be a basic part of every doctoral student's academic armamentarium, providing an intellectual baseline for evaluating the significance of new theories and techniques, as well as a means for appreciating both the continuing development of management thinking across time and the enduring contributions of our discipline's leading laureates.

LESSONS TO BE LEARNED

There are many reasons (some obvious and some less so) why those training for careers as manage-

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The helpful comments of W. Jack Duncan and Daniel A. Wren on an earlier draft manuscript are most gratefully acknowledged.

ment scholars should be acquainted with the history of our discipline. Beyond simply being widely educated, it is my experience that students will learn at least five invaluable lessons from the historical study of management thinking. Each lesson highlights the fact that the past exists in a reciprocal relationship with the present. Just as the past is seen through the eyes of the present, the present is judged in an unending dialogue with the past. As such, our contemporary definition of significant research questions, understanding and use of basic concepts, and derivation and testing of substantive hypotheses are each simultaneously current and historical (for a synoptic review of the interplay between past and present, see Bluedorn, 2002). In this sense, our discipline's history and theory are merged on a "voyage of discovery," in which answers to analytical questions require an appreciation of history's complexities, not only to "get the history right" but, also, to "get the theory right" (Griffin, 1993).

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Avoid the Pathetic Fallacy

First among the lessons to be learned from the historical study of management thinking is that ideas are always a product of their own time and place. The construction and elaboration of management knowledge, not to mention the practice of management, are consequently a human endeavor in which questions and answers are conceived within a unique and time-bound setting. As times change, management ideas, if they are to retain relevance, must also change. In assessing this change, management scholars (aspiring and seasoned alike) unfamiliar with our discipline's past all too often fall victim to the historian's *pathetic fallacy*, whereby events and ideas are abstracted from their historical context and judged with direct reference to the present without an awareness of what Lovejoy (1936) has referred to as their *metaphysical pathos*, meaning the prevailing beliefs, values, and feelings that colored their development (p. 11).

Predictably, this has resulted in self-proclaimed "forces of light" mounting cross-generational attacks against designated "forces of darkness." By wrenching individual phenomena from their historical context and abstracting them in relation to contemporary analogies, successive generations of "enlightened" management scholars have established their "progressive" credentials without regard for anachronistic misrepresentation. Thus, over the past half-century, there have been repeated attacks on such forces of darkness as Frederick W. Taylor, the Hawthorne Studies, the so-called classicists, and the human-relations school. Such assaults seem to run in 20- to 25-year cycles. An early lesson learned by those who study the past is that all intellectual progress is historically grounded and, thus, where and when events or ideas occur significantly affects their character. Moreover, those who study the past soon realize that this is inevitably true of their own work. Indeed, they likewise will be judged one day by a new generation of scholars bent on earning its own intellectual spurs. Unless they have been exposed to the aesthetics of our discipline's past as doctoral students, their provincialism will blind them to the realization that a sensitivity to context is essential for not only understanding "what," "how," and "why," but also for gaining insights into the ongoing flow of events and ideas that compose our collective heritage.

Thus, as someone who has edited the autobiographies (Bedeian, 1992, 1993a, 1993b, 1996, 1998, 2002) of over 60 of the current generation's leading scholars, I have gained a deeper understanding of how the evolving nature of the management discipline has been shaped by the time-specific social policies, practices, and structures created and experienced by succeeding cohorts of scholars. Beyond this, however, I have also become especially aware of what others before me have long realized: "There is no theory that is not a fragment, carefully prepared, of some autobiography" (Valéry, 1938/1958: 58). By studying our discipline's genesis and subsequent postpartum development, doctoral students will come to understand the importance of reference groups and reference individuals, the significant others who helped shape the character of contemporary management thought and inquiry. Perhaps even more important, doing so will unmask the purported objectivity of methodized science and explain why academic presentations so frequently begin with personal explanations of "how I came to this problem" (McCloskey, 1985, p. xi). Thus, by clarifying the extent to which we compose a "community of scholars" (Duncan, Ford, Bousculp, & Ginter, 2002), history informs those who study our collective past that each generation functions within an intellectual milieu of ideas and people comprised of overlapping intellectual and social networks. No generation is or can be exempt from this truism.

Be an Informed Consumer of Received Knowledge

A *second* profitable lesson that doctoral students will gain from studying the history of management thought is the advantage of being an informed consumer of "received knowledge." What Stigler (1988) has noted with regard to economics is no less true for management as a discipline. That is, those who immerse themselves in the study of management thinking will learn that every theory is "first produced in a highly imperfect form, and only gradually will the larger imperfection be removed" (p. 215). They will also learn that "the sponsors of the new theory . . . exaggerate its merits and just as consistently exaggerate the deficiencies in the previous knowledge they are seeking to displace" (p. 215). A review of management journals and books provides ample evidence that "academic salesmanship" is alive and well within the management discipline. Merton (1957) has suggested that such salesmanship is part of the institutional norms of science itself, wherein recognition for originality provides social validation for one's success as a scholar (p. 639). As informed consumers of received knowledge, students of our discipline's history soon learn to be leery of those who claim that nothing important had been discovered in their area of interest during all the preceding decades, and that it was only recently (coincidentally coinciding with their dates of publication) that any meaningful work had been accomplished. History has dubbed this foible the "discoverer's complex" (Sorokin, 1956: 3), a well-recognized occupational hazard of those unschooled in their historical ABCs and otherwise unfamiliar with thinkers of the past, who (if their existence is even acknowledged) may be presented as nothing more than "arm-chair philosophers" of no pedigree.

The historical record of our discipline contains various examples of academic salesmanship and the scholarly bunfights that have resulted. The conflict that has accompanied these examples underscores the significance attached to priority of achievement as prescribed by the cultural norms of our discipline and, by extension, raises questions about the equity with which our discipline allocates professional recognition. The contest for priority between Jacob L. Moreno and Kurt Lewin regarding the discovery of group dynamics illustrates the conflict that can result in such situations and the animus that naturally follows. Believing that Lewin and his students had appropriated his ideas and techniques, Moreno (1953) openly accused them of not only stealing and distorting his creative achievements, but also of inflating their own contributions by only quoting each other and not citing his work or that of his associates. As informed consumers of received knowledge, students of history are not only versed in recognizing attempts to sell old ideas as new, but understand the danger of naively inflating one's own achievements by disregarding the work of others and, thus, becoming (to borrow a colorful phrase from Moreno) the "laughing stock of the connoisseurs" (p. cii).

Seek Original Sources

A *third* lesson that doctoral students will learn from studying the history of management is the danger inherent in relying on secondary source materials. Those who study management history know all too well that inaccuracies and myths arise when contemporary scholars fail to use primary sources in their research and rely on textbook accounts or research reviews for their knowledge of the past. Such sources have been repeatedly shown to be inaccurate in the recounting of even so-called classic studies, and serve to perpetuate historical illiteracy as misrepresentations are transmitted from generation to generation and, ultimately, become accepted as fact (e.g., Bluedorn, Keon, & Carter, 1985; Patzig & Wisdom, 1986; Patzig & Zimmerman, 1985–86; Pethia, 1983; Zimmerman, 1978). That successive generations of students entering our discipline need to learn this lesson is at times puzzling. All my students are told, "If you haven't held it in your hand, it shouldn't be cited as a primary source." This is obviously not a new problem, however. In reiterating the importance of historical accuracy, I can do no better than quote a reviewer writing more than 2 centuries ago:

> . . . in proportion as History removes from the first witnesses, it may recede also from truth,—as, by passing through the prejudices, or the mistakes of subsequent Compilers, it will be apt to imbibe what tincture they may chance to give it. The *later* Historian's only way, therefore, to prevent the ill effects of that decrease of evidence which the lapse of years necessarily brings with it, must be, by punctually referring to the spring head from whence the stream of his narration flows; which at once will cut off all appearance of partiality, or misrepresentation. (Griffihts, 1757: 531).

Whereas this is 250-year-old wisdom, it seems only faintly remembered by contemporary scholars, many of whom appear to consider it a quaint maxim. It is a lesson, however, that merits reiteration as each new generation enters our discipline. Doctoral students studying management history soon become aware of the numerous inaccuracies in the written record of our discipline and, as Pethia (1983) has noted, the "distortion . . . begins early" and in at least one case even occurred when the "ink was barely dry" (pp. 40, 53). Furthermore, they likewise quickly realize that this distortion surfaces not only in the misinterpretation of classic studies, but is also evident in the problem of citation errors. In particular, the frequency with which one encounters inaccuracies due to authors copying erroneous references and quotations from other sources makes one doubt whether some of the citing authors had even verified the original references, let alone read them. For students of history, with their appreciation of continuing misrepresentations of the past, such inaccuracies are hardly surprising and simply further underscore the importance of relying on primary, rather than secondary source materials to document the development of our discipline.

Facts Are Often Wrong

Historical illiteracy may explain a *fourth* lesson of historical scholarship: "Widely accepted facts are often wrong" (Stigler, 1988, p. 218). Factual errors occur for varying reasons. Perhaps the most disturbing is the failure of contemporary writers to incorporate new discoveries into textbooks and other published materials. As a case in point, Wrege and Perroni (1974) were able to show that Taylor's successive renditions of his famous pig-iron handling experiments were increasingly fictitious. Nonetheless, in a survey of 25 introductory textbooks, Bluedorn, Keon, and Carter (1985) found that only two reported this fact, continuing instead to promulgate a debunked myth.

Other reasons for factual errors being accepted as true range from a failure to recognize the "legacy of knowledge" received from predecessors, so as to take credit for being the first to make a discovery (to become what Sorokin [1956, p. 3] has tagged a "New Columbus"), to what Merton (1963) has labeled "cryptomnesia" or "unconscious plagiary," where authors have honestly forgotten the source of their ideas (p. 272). Should one doubt the likelihood of such forgetfulness, Merton cites numerous examples of scholars literally forgetting their own earlier work and reinventing or rediscovering the same phenomena more than once! He also cites examples of *paramnesia*, meaning distortions of memory in which factual and imagined events become confused. Such confusion leads to "pseudofacts" that, left unchallenged, soon become accepted as true (Merton, 1987).

Whatever their origin, the fact remains, however, that once such errors of memory or attribution are put into print, they become diffused and amplified, taking on a life of their own. As but one example, Norbert Weiner's claim that he coined the term *cybernetics* has been repeated over and over. As his biographer makes clear, however, this is a term that appears throughout ancient Greek writings dating back to Plato (Masani, 1989). Whether this is a case of cryptomnesia is unknown. What remains, however, is the historian's realization that the origins of many concepts are mistakenly attributed either because so few scholars are knowledgeable of their discipline's past or because the concepts have been appropriated by New Columbuses anxious to establish a priority claim. As an example of the former, one simply has to compare the frequency that the concepts of mores, enacted environment, ethnocentrism, and in-group–out-group appear in the literature of our discipline with the infrequency of references to their originator, William Graham Sumner (1906), to verify a seeming widespread unfamiliarity with their provenance.

In a related vein, it is also interesting to note the perpetuation of errors in application that result from the misinterpretation of an original source and, then, the subsequent misinterpretation's rote repetition (see, e.g., Harzing, 2002). Bedeian and Mossholder (2000) have documented an example of such repetition in the misapplication of the coefficient of variation (V), a statistical measure commonly used for comparing group-based demographic differences in organizations. They recount how Allison (1978), among others, notes that because V is invariant to scale transformations this typically rules out its use with interval-level data. Nonetheless, one finds Allison cited to support the contention that because V is scale invariant it is *preferred* for use with interval-level variables. This error seems to have taken on a life of its own as it continues to be disseminated from author to author, leaving one to wonder how many more times Allison's work has been cited than read. Students of management history know that, whatever the cause, such pseudo-facts lead to pseudo-accuracy in the knowledge that is passed on as part of our intellectual legacy.

A Special Advantage of the Past

A *fifth* lesson that doctoral students will learn from studying the history of management is what Stigler (1988) has dubbed a special advantage of the past: "It allows [an] association with superior minds" (p. 219). To borrow from Stigler, no university will ever have at one time four management scholars of the quality of Max Weber, Henri Fayol, Mary P. Follett, and Chester I. Barnard, to say nothing of a dozen of their brightest peers—but they can all reside in one's library. With only the cost of one's intellectual effort, the insights of these and other scholars of the past are available to repeatedly engage, delight, and pique one's curiosity at a moment's notice. Establishing a link with such great minds reinforces the continuity of generations across time and allows the repeated tapping of our discipline's greatest minds (Stinchcombe, 1982).

Toward this end, I have strived to have my students recognize and appreciate "their place in history." In an effort to accomplish this goal, I have provided those students whose dissertations I have chaired (*Doktorvater*) a history of our common pedigree or, what might be termed, a map of our academic DNA. Thus, with tongue-in-cheek, I'm able to tell them each that we are academic descendants of Christ—that is, Johann F. Christ who was awarded an honorary doctorate from the University of Leipzig in 1731. As shown in Figure 1, I have been able to trace our academic heritage back 12 generations. Ours is a filiality borne of a Germanic tradition with scholarly roots in history, theology, philosophy, and economics. These roots were first transplanted to the United States in 1879 with our "academic ancestor" economist Richard T. Ely. Beyond creating a sense of identity, this academic genealogy conveys a sense of history, connecting us each with the intellectual progenitors to which we owe a common debt. Furthermore, it provides an opportunity to highlight the common origins of the various disciplines that have combined to give management its multidisciplinary focus and to discuss the German model of higher education that yet dominates advanced degree programs in the United States. Once again, as a benefit of studying management history, students of our discipline's past learn that a free commerce between the ages cements our kinship with those who have gone before us, thereby, allowing them to more fully appreciate their own time and place in the parade of history.

Arthur G. Bedeian
Mississippi State University, 1973
‡
Giovanni B. Giglioni
Indiana University, 1969
‡
Charles F. Bosner
Indiana University, 1965
‡
William H. Andrews, Jr.
University of Chicago, 1948
‡
J. Roy Blough
University of Wisconsin, 1929
‡
William F. Keikhofer
University of Wisconsin, 1913
‡
Richard T. Ely
University of Heidelberg, 1879
‡
Karl G. A. Knies
University of Marburg, 1846
‡
Bruno Hildebrand
University of Bresleau, 1836
‡
Gustav A. H. Stenzel
University of Leipzig, 1815
‡
Gottfried Hermann
University of Leipzig, 1794
‡
Friedrich W. R. Reiz
University of Leipzig, 1753
‡
Johann F. Christ
University of Leipzig, 1731

FIGURE 1
Academic Pedigree (Showing Major Professor and Student with University and Date of Highest Degree)

CONCLUSION

I have been interested in the evolution of management thinking since I wrote my dissertation in the area 30 years ago (Bedeian, 1973–1986). For me, an understanding of the historical development of our discipline is the whole that binds the various specialties that compose modern management. Moreover, it has been only by appreciating the discipline's roots and the common origins of its modes of thinking that I have come to view the continued progress of management as both an art and a science. Admittedly, a call for including a history of management course in graduate management curricula at the professional level is not new (cf. Van Fleet & Wren, 1982–1983; Wren, 1987). To date, however, it is a call that has fallen on deaf ears. History teaches many relevant lessons. Our willingness to decoct and share these lessons with our students is one of our greatest teaching assets. Writing over 70 years ago, Gary Boring (1929)—the last century's reigning doyen of psychological historians—noted that the "gift of professional maturity" comes only to those who know the history of their discipline (p. x). As someone for whom management history has not lost its fascination, I can only add that I believe this is even truer today, and will continue to be so for our students in the years to come.

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