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Totems and Taboos: Undercurrents in the Management Discipline

by Arthur G. Bedeian, Louisiana State University

Presidential Address delivered at the Annual Meeting of the Academy of Management, Washington, DC, August 15, 1989

When I initially began to think about a topic for my presidential address, I first thought about choosing one of the several research areas in which I've worked all of my professional life. Rather than embarking on a presentation that likely would have relevance only to some colleagues, I chose a topic in which all of us are or should be interested: that is, the management discipline. More specifically, I wish to discuss various "totems and taboos" that have developed as undercurrents in our discipline. The undercurrents with which I am concerned have, in my judgment, not



only fostered the growth of self-absorbed activities, but also the growth of narrow, overly-specialized interests, and "sect-like, esoteric ruminations" (Coser, 1975, p. 691).

My address has four parts. The first reviews the various stages through which scientific disciplines typically evolve. The remaining three parts each treat an undercurrent—what I term a "totem or taboo"—our discipline faces. The first of these undercurrents is the mindlessness of much of our discipline's research. The second is the ever-greater specialization of fields and subfields within our disci-

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Call for Nominations

Editors of the Academy of Management Journal and Academy of Management Review

The Board of Governors is seeking nominations for editors of *AMJ* and *AMR*. The term of office for each editor is three years beginning January 1, 1991. Upon appointment, each editor will serve as an associate editor to work with the outgoing editors and, thereby, facilitate the transition.

The criteria for selection include: 1) Intellectual contribution to a field of study associated with the Academy of Management; 2) positive experience as a reviewer for professional journals including the *Academy of Management Journal* and the *Academy of Management Review*; 3) commitment of the nominee's university for journal support in the form

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pline. The third and final undercurrent is the peculiar nature of our academic institution.

Stages of Growth

In her insightful analysis of fashion in science, Diana Crane (1972) has shown that research areas typically pass through several stages of growth.¹ Each stage is accompanied by a series of changes in the characteristics of scientific knowledge and of the scientific community that comprises the area. In stage one, interesting discoveries suggest new models for future work and attract enthusiastic converts. In stage two, a small number of highly productive scientists set research priorities, recruit and train students, and maintain informal contacts with one another. This results in a period of exponential growth in publications and membership. However, in later stages—stages three and four—seminal ideas become exhausted, seemingly no longer sufficient to explain unexpected anomalies in the research area's original paradigm. At this juncture, a decline in membership and publications sets in. Those members who remain develop increasingly narrow and specialized interests. Although these interests

are often methodologically sophisticated, unless a new paradigm emerges to prompt a new growth cycle, the research area gradually becomes exhausted and declines.

Crane's model of a typical research area's growth is not meant to refer to a whole discipline or branch of knowledge. It would thus be cavalier to apply the model to the management discipline as a whole. After all, the Academy comprises some twenty subfields or divisions, each with unique features. At the same time, based on Crane's model and my own energetic but admittedly unsystematic observations, I would like to venture certain misgivings about several recent undercurrents in our common enterprise.

Viewing our discipline as a whole, we are arguably still in Crane's second stage of development. Using this year's annual program as a measure, a majority of our professional divisions are marked by lively debate and creative proposals. Nonetheless, several danger signs—or what I have referred to as totems and taboos—have appeared, suggesting that unless a series of intellectual and social changes occur in the management discipline we may be facing lean and infertile times in the years ahead.

I should define the term "we." Following stan-

dard parlance (cf. Gans, 1989, p. 2), I use it broadly, referring to "we the discipline" and "we the members of the guild." As I have acknowledged, I do this while at the same time recognizing that our discipline comprises numerous subfields. "We" is thus largely a shorthand for how "numbers of us act" or "how we should all act." In following this convention, my "we" mostly refers to the academic side of our discipline, not to our practitioner colleagues.²

Mindless Research

The first undercurrent I wish to discuss is the mindlessness of much of our discipline's research. As described by Gans (1989), such mindlessness . . . cuts across [subfields] and methods. It is the use of proxies or indicators because tangentially appropriate quantitative data are accessible, even though these proxies have only the most tenuous logical or empirical connection to the phenomena under study. Mindlessness is grounding the analysis of a complicated phenomenon on survey questions without any idea of how respondents understood the questions. Mindless fieldwork supplies thick descriptions of what is already common

knowledge but fails to provide the thick analyses that are sorely needed. And whatever the research method, there are still occasional . . . analyses that, once translated into ordinary English, turn out to be examples of what we have often been accused of: restating the obvious. (p. 10)

This latter accusation highlights another particularly disappointing aspect of our discipline's mindlessness: that is, our failure to foster a productive interplay between theory and research.

The dominant paradigm within our discipline has traditionally contained two components—a creative aspect and a critical aspect (McGuire, 1973, p. 447). The creative component has involved hypothesis generation, while the critical component has involved hypothesis testing. The accusation that our work too often restates the obvious is a consequence of the fact that, as William J. McGuire (1973, p. 448) observes, we have too often tended to use our research not to test theoretically-derived hypotheses, but rather to demonstrate their truth. We have begun our research with hypotheses that are so clearly true, given both our implicit and explicit assumptions, that if all our premises held, then

our hypotheses would obviously be true. Our failure to foster a productive interplay between theory and research has recently prompted David A. Whetten (1988), editor of our *Academy of Management Review*, to announce a call for papers for a special forum on "Theory Building." By focusing on the theory-building process, Dave hopes to strengthen the theory development activity within the Academy.

Further evidence of mindlessness in our research is our "passion for methodology" (Gans, 1989, p. 10). Simply put, too much of our discipline is "theory thin" and "method driven." This undercurrent has resulted in at least two imperfections. First, our preoccupation with method has often led to a neglect of the significant and substantive. As described by Coser (1975), this has led to a situation where "the methodological tail wags the substantive dog." Or, in Robert Bierstedt's (1974, p. 316) view, method is considered the independent variable and substance the dependent variable. In the last analysis, our discipline will be judged on the basis of the substantive enlightenment it has supplied, not on the basis of the methodological heat it has generated. If we persist in neglecting this mindlessness, we will continue to de-

serve the criticism so commonly sent our way by the popular press.

A second imperfection resulting from our passion for methodology is a misplaced faith in techniques for data manipulation. Judging from our published research, an all too common fallacy appears to be the belief that "one can compensate for theoretical weakness by methodological strength" (Coser, 1975, p. 692). We seem to be expert at applying sophisticated data manipulation techniques to data hardly warranting the effort. The net effect again is that the significant and substantive is neglected in favor of an emphasis on methodological elegance. As David P. Campbell (cited in Dunnette, 1966, p. 344) has remarked,

We seem to believe that TRUTH will be discovered somehow through using more and more esoteric techniques of data manipulation rather than by looking for it in the real world.

Overspecialization

The second undercurrent I wish to discuss is the ever greater specialization of fields and subfields within our discipline. In looking back over the last two decades in which I have been an Academy member, I am struck by many trends. The trend

that I find perhaps the most disconcerting is the seemingly inexorable movement toward greater and greater academic specialization.

The evidence of this movement toward greater academic specialization is present in our annual meetings, our journals, and even in the training of our graduate students. When I attended my first Southern Management Association meeting in 1970 and was asked my area of study, I replied simply, "Management." Now, such a reply would be laughable. Today's graduates are being trained not in management, but in such subfields as "pop ecology" "transaction-cost analysis," or "resource dependency."

This specialization is hardly surprising. There are, after all, many thousands of management researchers with an interest in cultivating their own turf. The end result of this ever greater specialization may well be that our discipline will come to look like a wheel, with people sitting on their own spokes talking less and less to those on other spokes. Eventually, if care is not taken, the wheel may become a doughnut, with a gaping intellectual hole in the middle.³ Our challenge, of course, is to prevent both the wheel and the intellectual hole (Gans, 1989, p. 13).

Current subfield boundaries within our discipline are arbitrary and

should be crossed freely. To the extent that the boundaries between the Academy's professional divisions are living membranes which allow osmosis of ideas to take place, they may be necessary to our vital processes. To the extent that they have become fossilized relics, ends in themselves rather than a means for fostering the development of new knowledge, they are constraints on our discipline's intellectual boldness (adapted from Hunter Rawlings cited in "1989: A Time for New Alliances," 1989).

What our generation seems to lack is what Daniel P. Moynihan has called the "great complexifiers," the Chester I. Barnards, the Mary P. Folletts, the people who tend to gravitate toward ambiguity and away from subjective certainty. Such intellectual brokers are needed to serve as go-betweens or exchange agents between our discipline's subfields. Our big problems are rarely encapsulated in any one specialty. They inevitably require multiple approaches and participation by multiple kinds of experts (Odegaard, 1987, p. 1050).

Many of the difficulties in our academic thinking stem from an overemphasis on specialized aspects of managing without

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recognizing the interdependence and importance of the various functions that constitute the management process. It is not enough for a manager, or someone who purports to teach future managers, to be competent in one or two subfields. Rather, success requires the ability to move across what Harold J. Leavitt (1986, p. 4) calls the "harsh terrain" that separates them.

Peculiar Institution

The third, and final, undercurrent I wish to discuss is the peculiar nature of our academic institution, an institution that Gans (1989) has likened to a machine shop in which publications are treated like piecework. He has observed: "Although we are paid for the number of courses we teach, we are promoted by how much we publish, and only sometimes by the quality of our publications" (p. 12).

As a consequence, our careers are more easily advanced through quantity rather than quality of publication. Is it then any wonder that an all too common and arguably justifiable criticism of our discipline is that "increases in knowledge are not accompanied by a commensurable increase in wisdom"?

(Viteles, 1974, p. 465)

We have been criticized repeatedly in the popular press for solving trivial problems. Worse, we have been criticized further for being more interested in advancing our careers than in educating the constituencies of management knowledge—our students, practitioners, public-policy makers, and society in general.

James Rosenzweig, a former editor of the *Academy of Management Review*, tells a story about the time he took a copy of *AMR* to a corporate staff meeting. Reading its table of contents aloud brought loud laughter. As Jim concludes, "we do talk funny." I share his concern further, however, that we may be "talking to ourselves." Jim, whose theme I am here repeating, suggests that we may be constructing a closed system with no input or output. As we all know, such systems lose energy, decay, and, ultimately, end in chaos. This may be an overly pessimistic view. Human systems can change through adaptation and innovation. Yet in my opinion, there is cause for concern.

Jim recommends, and I agree, that

A broader definition of . . . scholarship would help to open the system. By making publication in refereed journals the only criterion of academic prowess even

within the typical teaching-research-service triumvirate, we channel efforts in a way that could be disastrous in the long run. We are pressured toward more and more outlets with more and more pages. We are quick to develop formats and styles that are successful and that constrain all those that follow. When in doubt we lean toward a conservative model of traditional academic goodness [that screens] out [many] potential contributors. We focus on doing things right at the expense of wondering whether we are doing the right things. We exclude a wide range of means to demonstrate scholarship when we adhere to a narrow view of what's good and desirable and worthwhile. (Rosenzweig, 1966, p. 11)

Janice M. Beyer, immediate past editor of the *Academy of Management Journal*, has, with tongue-in-cheek, recommended one solution to what she too sees as the overwhelming pressure to publish more and more pages. Jan suggests that, upon receipt of the terminal degree, potential authors receive an allocation of a fixed number of journal pages for their entire career. Some people would use fewer

pages, but no one could use more. Presumably the pressure to publish quantity would then shift to an emphasis on quality.

Conclusion

Viewed from a global perspective, there is nothing surprising about the undercurrents—what I have called "totems and taboos"—our discipline faces. Each can be found in our companion social sciences. Although this suggests that their causes transcend our own discipline, we should not use the shortcomings of others to excuse our own imperfections (Gans, 1989, p. 10).

Is there a way out of this dilemma? While I do not pretend to have all the answers, several ideas do suggest themselves. For instance, as one solution to the mindlessness of much of our discipline's research, academics and practitioners could work together, with the Academy serving as a forum, to "identify critical issues of practical significance to practicing managers." These issues would have to be suitable for academic research. This, of course, would require many of us to rethink our research agenda, as well as the way we evaluate faculty contributions and performance. It would also require that we set aside our preference for "tidy academic research" and, instead, embrace

messy, real-life management problems (Stata, 1989, p. 72).

As for overspecialization of fields and subfields within our discipline, perhaps it is time for the structure of the Academy's professional divisions to be re-evaluated. A simpler and more meaningful structure might be possible. Again, the Academy's professional divisions should foster the development of new knowledge, not constrain our discipline's intellectual boldness.

Finally, as regards our discipline's peculiar nature, a broader definition of "scholarship" would seem imperative. We must strive to avoid straightjacketing our junior faculty at the most crucial, formative stage of their careers. At the same time, we must re-evaluate the realities of our tenure and promotion systems so as to reward faculty for doing a few pieces of high-quality research, rather than grinding out multiple publications and simply playing a numbers game. As currently practiced, most of our tenure and promotion systems not only discourage interdisciplinary, longitudinal field studies—the "anthropological field work" that is so badly needed as a foundation for meaningful research—but also topics where "risk" is involved. The jeopardy of being un-

able to collect necessary data, or not finding statistically significant results, or engaging in research projects that are meaningful, but take years before a worthwhile product can be identified are luxuries seldom tolerated by most tenure and promotion systems.

Admittedly, owing to our discipline's complex objectives and the turbulent reality we deal with, we face an extremely difficult set of intellectual and practical tasks. In this respect, each of us has the undeniable obligation to move our common enterprise forward. Each of us must accept the challenge of widening the road to wisdom. There is much to be studied, written, and accomplished.

In closing, I am reminded that Aristotle wrote: "Dignity does not consist in possessing honors but in deserving them." In this spirit, I thank you for the distinct honor of serving as the Academy's 44th president.

End Notes

1. This framework and the ensuing warning were suggested by Coser (1975, pp. 691-692).
2. See Gans (1989, p. 2) for a similar apology.
3. This analogy was originally suggested by my colleague, geographer Sam B. Hillard (cited in

Winkler, 1986, p. 7) describing his own discipline. His remarks, however, apply equally well to management.

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Author Notes

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NOMINATIONS

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of office space and release from instructional duties; 4) demonstrated ability as an administrator and capacity to handle a large workload and meet deadlines. Nominations will be accepted until December 1, 1989. Indicate whether the nomination is for AMJ or AMR. Submit the nominee's name and full address along with a supporting letter to the chair of the search committee. Self nominations are acceptable.

Richard L. Daft, Chair
Owen Graduate School of
Management
Vanderbilt University
Nashville, TN 37203

Cooper Assumes Duties as Secretary-Treasurer



Ken Cooper has been appointed to a three year term as Secretary-Treasurer of the Academy. With this appointment, the Academy business office has relocated to Ohio Northern University, Box 39, Ada, OH 45810.

At Ohio Northern, Cooper serves as the Dean of the College of Business Administration. His career has been evenly divided between academe and business with faculty or administrative appointments at Miami University (Ohio), College of St. Thomas, Hamline University and the University of Minnesota. He also spent fourteen years with Land O'Lakes, Inc., where he served as group vice president and chief operating officer of the Agricultural Services Group. In his new capacity as Secretary-Treasurer of the Academy, Cooper plans to carry forward the emphasis on service to members exemplified by outgoing Secretary-Treasurer Walter Newsom of Mississippi State University.

Newman Receives First Educator Award

William H. Newman (Columbia University, emeritus) was presented the first Academy of Management Distinguished Educator Award during the Presidential luncheon at the Academy annual meeting. Don Hellriegel (Texas A&M University) presented this new all-Academy award. He noted that the criteria for this award include excellence in one or more of the following: 1) development of doctoral students, 2) communication of knowledge (effectiveness in the classroom or other forums), and 3) pedagogical innovation (development of effective methods, structures, and designs) for the communication of knowledge. Bill Newman was recognized for his exemplary achievements in all three criteria.

Aldag Assumes Duties as Vice President and Program Chair



Ramon J. Aldag is professor of Management and Organization and co-director of the Center for the Study of Organizational Performance in the Graduate School of Business, and participating faculty member in the Industrial Relations Research Institute, at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. At Wisconsin, he has served as chair of the Manage-

ment Department and associate director of the Industrial Relations Research Institute. He holds the B.S. in Mechanical Engineering, the M.B.A. in Production Management, and the Ph.D. in Management, all from Michigan State University. He has worked as a thermal engineer on Apollo, Voyager, and other aerospace projects at the Bendix Aerospace Division