

FROM THE EDITORS

FALLING IN LOVE AGAIN WITH WHAT WE DO: ACADEMIC CRAFTSMANSHIP IN THE MANAGEMENT SCIENCES

Scholarship is a choice of how to live as well as a choice of career; whether he knows it or not, the intellectual workman forms his own self as he works toward perfection of his craft; to realize his potentialities, and any opportunities that come his way, he constructs a character which has at its core the qualities of the good workman.

—C. W. Mills, 1959

Hidden behind an unassuming door in the basement attached to Tokyo Metro's Ginza Station in the heart of the city lies what is considered by many to be the finest sushi restaurant in the world. Behind the counter of Sukiyabashi Jiro, which only seats 10, stand master chef Jiro Ono and his son Yoshikazu Ono. Jiro Ono, who is 91, has been making sushi since the age of 9. Even after spending more than eight decades refining his craft, he still is in search of perfection. His goal is simple: make better sushi, every time. According to Ono, perfection comes from doing the same thing repeatedly, improving it bit by bit. He compares his pursuit to that of trying to ascend a mountain: perfection is attempting to reach the top, yet not knowing where the top is. Although, according to this perspective, he has not perfected his craft, he has reached culinary perfection—at least in the eyes of the Michelin Guide reviewers. In 2007, they rewarded Sukiyabashi Jiro three stars, making Jiro Ono the only sushi chef in the world to receive that honor.

If, at this point, we have sparked your interest in the notion of craftsmanship,¹ then we have achieved our first objective. However, if you stop reading here and head out for some sushi, then we have failed at the second—to reaffirm the notion that scholarly pursuit in the management sciences (and other

domains for that matter) is a form of craftsmanship as well. In many ways, the art of making sushi as practiced by Ono is not all that different from pursuing a particular research question, or an academic career more generally. Ono is a craftsman in the truest sense of the word. Guided by the single-minded goal of pursuing perfection in the execution of his craft, while acknowledging that achieving such perfection remains an unobtainable objective, he has made making better sushi the purpose of his life—so much so that he dreams of sushi (hence the title to the documentary about Ono, *Jiro Dreams of Sushi*; Iwashina, Pellegrini, & Gelb, 2012). We suspect that many scholars can empathize with Ono's condition. After all, many of us can easily retrieve memories of restless nights when the dissertation made unwelcome appearances in our dreams. Like Ono, many of us have entered academic life in the pursuit of a single-minded goal—to help us understand something new about the world of organizations—while being painfully aware of the fact that such a pursuit may never come to a satisfactory conclusion. Scholarly life and inquiry, at least at first glance, seem to embody many of the features we associate with craftsmanship.

THE NATURE OF CRAFTSMANSHIP

Being a craftsman implies that one has reached a high level of proficiency in one's craft. For instance, in some countries, the "master craftsman" is among the highest, most prestigious professional qualifications. To obtain this distinction, the aspiring master is required to advance through a series of steps, from apprentice to journeyman, and, ultimately, after years of arduous effort, perhaps be recognized as a master craftsman. At the end of the journey, the craftsman is expected to produce a masterpiece—a piece of work that, in part, determines the individual's fitness for guild membership. The principles guiding the advancement to master craftsman also apply to academic settings. In fact, the academic degree of "master of arts" originally recognized individuals, at least in

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¹ We use the term "craftsman" for readability, but are referring to craftsmen, craftswomen, and craftspeople throughout the editorial.

medieval universities, as master craftsmen in their chosen academic area.

There is more to being a master craftsman, however, than skill acquisition. The Japanese word for “craftsman” is *shokunin*. *Shokunin* implies that skills are used to their fullest potential and that one is dedicated to the craft for the welfare of the community. In the words of Tasio Odate, the Japanese woodworking legend, “The Japanese apprentice is taught that *shokunin* means not only having technical skills, but also implies an attitude and social consciousness. . . . The *shokunin* has a social obligation to work his/her best for the general welfare of the people. This obligation is both spiritual and material, in that, no matter what it is, the *shokunin*’s responsibility is to fulfill the requirement” (as cited in Nagyszalanczy, 2000: 131). From this view, craftsmanship is an expansive concept. It means to invest oneself fully into the work, to use one’s skills to the fullest potential, to create something with the utmost care, to strive for perfection every time, and to recognize that one’s responsibility is not only to the craft itself but to the wider community that the craft is serving. Naturally, this level of dedication only comes when we are “in love” with what we are doing. Thus, intrinsic motivation—the type of motivation that comes from investing oneself fully in the pursuit of a challenging goal and is signified by feelings of joy and excitement—is indispensable in becoming a master craftsman.

ACADEMIC CRAFTSMANSHIP

We define “academic craftsmanship” in the management sciences as the noble and socially responsible pursuit of perfection in creating new understandings about the world of organizations. Assuming that a certain level of mastery in one’s academic field has been acquired and demonstrated—that is, the voyage from apprentice (i.e., PhD student) to journeyman (i.e., postdoc and assistant professor) has been completed—the question arises as to how we can adhere to and live by the principles of academic craftsmanship as we continue our careers.

Falling in Love Again . . . and Again

In the biopic about his work (Iwashina et al., 2012), Jiro Ono stated that he fell in love with it and dedicated his life to it, and despite not having reached perfection—the constitution of which may be unknowable—felt ecstatic about his work every day with no intention to retire. To live by the principles

of a *shokunin*, it is essential that we fall in love, and stay in love, with what we are doing. After the arduous journey of completing a dissertation, many aspiring scholars may feel a sense of exhaustion. In an effort to reinvigorate themselves, they may pursue new ideas and forge new research collaborations. We know from existing research that new collaborations are a valuable mechanism for ensuring sustained creativity (Guimerà, Uzzi, Spiro, & Amaral, 2005). But, starting new collaborations and pursuing novel ideas must be managed carefully. All too often, partnerships are struck opportunistically—an unexamined data set may be available, access to an organization may be offered, or new ideas are pursued because they grab our attention momentarily. In such cases, the research question—the problem that is being solved—becomes an afterthought. To fall in love means to get to know the topic of inquiry intimately. True intimacy may not be possible if we pursue ideas opportunistically, even if this pursuit results in the occasional publication. In fact, in many cases, this strategy may not result in a successful outcome at all (Shaw, 2017).

What about alternative strategies? One strategy that we would recommend is to carefully craft the research question, every time. A research question that causes us to fall in love with our work is one that (a) *needs* answering (i.e., answering the question resolves existing inconsistencies in our understanding of a particular problem); (b) is *worth* answering (i.e., answering the question contributes to community or societal welfare); and (c) is *personally meaningful* so that we are willing to dedicate a significant portion of our lives to answering it, feeling excited while doing so. It may take years or decades to comprehensively answer such a question—with each theoretical or empirical study, another piece of the puzzle is put in place. Given the importance of the initial question to the research endeavor, it is worth spending a substantial amount of time comprehensively framing and formulating it (Baer, Dirks, & Nickerson, 2012). Yet, this is often the phase of the research process that seems to receive the least amount of attention, commonly being treated as an afterthought and only rising to the fore when it comes time to craft the opening paragraphs to a manuscript. Needless to say, the “afterthought” approach is in stark contrast to the principles of craftsmanship—the approach is neither noble nor socially responsible. It puts the “ends before the means” (e.g., trying to get a publication at all costs), perhaps without paying attention to community or societal welfare. But, this approach is also

inefficient—it may result in countless iterations, years of wasted efforts, and often the abandonment of the particular question—and generally ineffective—it is unlikely to result in valid insights. Being an academic craftsman implies that our pursuits are guided by the insight that we are servants not only to the community of scholars who build on our work but also to the community of students and the public who digest and act upon the ideas we generate. We owe it to them to conduct our work to the fullest extent of our abilities and with the necessary care.

Pride and Perfection

Our definition of academic craftsmanship not only highlights the importance of dedicating ourselves to a research question that is worthy of study and is meaningful to our constituents and us, it also has implications for how we conduct ourselves in the pursuit of creating understandings. Being an academic craftsman implies that we execute our work with the utmost care, striving for perfection every time. This applies to the design of our studies, to the analysis of our data, to the preparation of our manuscripts. For young scholars, the concept of perfection may seem distal or perhaps intimidating. It can be. Perfection is elusive, and will remain unobtainable throughout our lives. This does not mean, however, that the pursuit of perfection is an unworthy goal. By dedicating ourselves to perfection, we develop a sense of psychological ownership of that which we are trying to understand (Pierce, Kostova, & Dirks, 2001). Not only does such ownership propel us to take pride in what we do, when we invest ourselves fully into the scientific process and come to psychologically own the ideas and questions we study, they become part of who we are. In that sense, and as indicated in the opening quote, pursuing perfection is not only an obligation to our community and constituents, it is also an obligation to us. We form ourselves as we work toward perfection. If we tolerate mediocrity, we deny ourselves the opportunity to develop fully. Ono has made sushi for more than 80 years and is still striving for perfection. Certainly, his skills have developed over these decades, but his love of the pursuit and the care he takes in preparing each piece have been unwavering. Can we say the same of ourselves? Are our research designs fine-tuned? Are the manuscripts we submit reflective of the notion of “utmost pride and care”?

As editors, we are often surprised by the lack of “pride and perfection” in submitted work, even when there is a kernel of a good idea somewhere in

the manuscript. Submitted manuscripts that report results from research designs in which many shortcuts have been taken are rather commonplace. In addition, many papers seem to have been hastily prepared and submitted, with obvious rough edges in terms of grammar and writing style. It is the editor’s job, and something in which we take pride also, to detect these ideas and to provide opportunities and avenues for the authors throughout the review process. But, an insufficient mindset for pride and perfection has pernicious consequences for authors that go beyond the editor’s attempts to salvage or develop the interesting facet of an idea. Reviewers often become frustrated with a lack of care in manuscript preparation, or comment on the opportunity missed by authors in the hasty decisions made in the design and execution of the work. These reactions can foil revision decisions by creating impatience and a negative trajectory in reviewer evaluations, which play a role in editorial decision-making.

The mindsets of pride and perfection should influence our day-to-day and perhaps even moment-to-moment activities. Consider it this way: if we had visited Ono’s restaurant 20 years ago, the sushi may have been excellent, but perhaps not up to today’s exacting standards for quality or superiority. His skill levels are certainly closer to perfection than in past decades, but the pride he took in preparing it for us and his attempt to create sushi perfection would have been the same then as now. Several years ago, a popular radio advertisement for an over-the-counter intestinal medication warned of the perils of eating sushi at the railway station. With dedication to his craft, Ono has changed the world’s perception from one of ridicule to reverence. Our aim here is to provoke thought and, we hope, inspire change in the way we think about our efforts and our craft, to consider the possibilities for our own work and our field should we take the utmost care and strive for perfection every time.

Societal Welfare

The last facet concerns the contribution of craft to the greater good of our communities and to society at large. As a field, we perhaps have fallen short on this dimension, distracted by the instrumental or near-term outcomes that we wish to achieve—publication, promotion, and prizes. We are certainly not implying that we, as scholars and authors ourselves, are immune to these failings. But, some reflection here may be in order. A craftsman recognizes a responsibility to the wider community that the craft

is serving. In the case of our craft, there are many constituents, including the community of scientists and researchers, our students and our universities, the business community, and the general public. In the research domain, specifically, it is important to consider the contributions of our research questions not only to the business community, but also to societal welfare. The series of grand challenge papers that appeared in *Academy of Management Journal* recently reveal the impact and importance that management research can have in addressing the world's most pressing problems. But, beyond the specific focus on central issues like those found in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, we must consider how our research contributes positively to the communities around us.

We are of the belief that the work we do is important, but also that there is a hunger for research-based knowledge from practitioners in the business community and consumers in the general public. How do we deliver this value? The research questions we formulate, not only in terms of whether they address issues related to the public good, but in terms of their specificity, precision, and elegance increases the likelihood that we are able to contribute effectively to our communities. Much time and attention has been paid to the rigor versus relevance debate in academic research. From our view, this debate is specious; the relevance of our contributions to society is inherently intertwined with our rigor. This is what we offer and what distinguishes academic research from other forms of knowledge generation. In offering what we do best—well-crafted theory, carefully designed empirical studies, and rigorous analytic approaches—our contributions to the broader community are maximized. When viewed in the alternative, the logic is clear: poorer craftsmanship will not enhance the public good. A community of craftsmen should engender the best returns to society.

The issue of accessibility is of critical importance here. Not all scholars have a desire to engage in research translations or other forms of practitioner-oriented writing. We do not advocate that all researchers must take responsibility for dissemination of their knowledge to all audiences of all forms. But, this does not obviate the need for clear, honest, and direct communication and writing that is accessible by readers outside of one's specific area and even outside academic circles. Many times, authors will create new terminology or new concepts to mask redundancies in ideas; the careful development of

new ideas and understandings is replaced with the use of new language. Not only does this pernicious habit lead to the inflation of concepts, resulting in the fragmentation of our field, the use of "facade words" (A. Knight, personal communication, July 26, 2017)—terminology that describes supposedly new ideas but only hides the fact that we are being served "old wine in new bottles," or no wine at all—makes it impossible for knowledge accumulation to occur. Note that this is in direct violation of the values of academic craftsmanship. Rather than being motivated by our concern for general societal welfare, we are driven by our own myopic interests of perhaps getting yet another "hit." Ono is using the same two-finger, gentle-touch approach when preparing sushi that he has been using for decades. He has not changed this approach or relabeled it in an attempt to lure more customers into his restaurant. His goal is to prepare perfect sushi, not to use gimmicks to attract new clients. As academic craftsmen, we should strive for the same when communicating our ideas—eschew obfuscation and espouse elucidation!

Conclusions

Our goal was to reaffirm the notion that scholarly pursuit in the management sciences is a form of craftsmanship—we are craftsmen! Some may dismiss our arguments as idealistic or romantic. The realities of life as an academic, the pressures we are under—to publish in order not to perish—offer an all-to-convenient excuse to dismiss our ideas. We would like to offer two counterarguments. First, as stated by Mills (1959: 196), "Scholarship is a choice of how to live as well as a choice of career." We cannot separate one from the other. If we take shortcuts in our academic work, we are short-changing ourselves, limiting the opportunity to develop ourselves to the fullest extent possible. And who wants to look back at his/her body of work only to conclude, "I could have done so much better." Second, as appealing as it may seem to opportunistically pursue ideas, to hastily design and execute studies to capitalize on such opportunities, and to dazzle editors and readers with new terminology, it does appear that there is one truism when it comes to scientific inquiry—there are no shortcuts. Eventually, our omissions will catch up with us—manuscripts are rejected or fail to influence the thinking and work of our colleagues and of society at large. When Ono started making sushi, he was not motivated by the thought that Sukiyabashi Jiro may

one day be awarded three Michelin stars; as a craftsman, he was and still is motivated by his love for sushi and his desire to prepare sushi to perfection and to the delight of his customers. It was this approach that earned him three stars, not his desire for success and fame. Three stars indicate that it is worth traveling to a country just to eat at that restaurant. Consequently, yearly, thousands of people travel to Tokyo to visit the basement level of a subway station. As it turns out, when we conduct ourselves as craftsmen, success and fame will find us. We don't have to go out looking for them.

And, now, feel free to head out for some sushi. We are already on our way.

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