

## FROM THE EDITORS

# MOVING FORWARD BY LOOKING BACK: RECLAIMING UNCONVENTIONAL RESEARCH CONTEXTS AND SAMPLES IN ORGANIZATIONAL SCHOLARSHIP

The *AMJ* mission statement, appearing in the front matter of every issue the *Journal* publishes and on the Academy of Management's website, reads in part as follows: "The mission of the *Academy of Management Journal* is to publish empirical research that tests, extends, or build management theory and contributes to management practice." But who and what must we researchers study to fulfill that mission? Looking at the table of contents of any recent issue, one could easily get the impression that to generate, extend, or test management theory, and contribute to management practice, one must study managers—preferably in for-profit business enterprises. Indeed, of the 639 papers appearing in the 60 issues of *AMJ* published between 1997 and 2007, only 47 (approximately 7 percent) focused on "lower-echelon employees" (i.e., non-managerial/nonprofessional staff) as their primary participants. Just under 80 articles (approximately 12 percent) were based on data collected in or about nonbusiness enterprises (e.g., universities, hospitals, unions, government agencies, schools, and nongovernmental agencies [NGOs]), a figure falling to fewer than 40 studies (6 percent) if one excludes the student samples used in the vast majority of studies coded as university-based. And only 38 studies (6 percent) examined not-for-profit organizations.

In this commentary, we argue that as scholars, we should remind ourselves that some of the most significant contributions to management theory emerged from what might best be labeled "unconventional" organizational research: research where either or both the sample and the context are unusual by today's norms. Specifically, we are referring to studies intended to enhance understanding of critical organizational phenomena and relations by focusing on lower-echelon employees and/or exploring phenomena or relations that are observable or open to discovery in extreme or "unusual" contexts.

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It is remarkable to note that what may be seen as "unconventional" now was once the bread and butter of management scholarship. Indeed, many if not most of the classical studies in organizational behavior and theory were studies of workers rather than managers. For example, Roethlisberger and Dickson's (1939) classic, *Management and the Worker*, was based on observations of workers, not managers, as were most of the studies in the human relations tradition emerging from it (Perrow, 1986). Similarly, much of the classical research on conflict and control in organizations also emerged from studies of lower-echelon workers (e.g., Crozier, 1964; Dalton, 1959; Kornhauser, Dubin, & Ross, 1954; Zald, 1962a, 1962b). Furthermore, rather than looking to for-profit enterprises for insights, these and other classic researchers primarily looked to a variety of organizations and institutions *other* than conventional businesses, including political parties (Michels, 1966), trade unions (Lipset, Trow, & Coleman, 1956), hospitals (Comstock & Scott, 1977), schools (e.g., Weick, 1976), public authorities (e.g., Selznick, 1949), and nonprofits/social movements (e.g., Zald & Denton, 1963).

Such an approach is certainly not altogether absent from the contemporary management literature. For example, a substantial portion of the research conducted by industrial/organizational psychologists focuses on nonmanagers. Moreover, articles such as Weick's (1993) study of the Mann Gulch disaster, and Dutton and Dukerich's (1991) study of the Port Authority of New York, concern nonbusiness settings. Notwithstanding, research in these unconventional areas appears far less prevalent today. Yes, the leading management journals (including *AMJ*) continue to publish, and even encourage, research on blue-collar and other "nonexempt" workers. Similarly, periodic special research forums (such as the one published by *AMJ* in December 2009) demonstrate special effort to encourage the generation and testing of management theory focusing on or having significant policy implications for social institutions, government agencies, and NGOs. But more can be done. Journals can only publish what they receive, so more research activity of this sort will likely lead to more publications.

Journals might be more welcoming, too. In our own experiences of publishing on lower-echelon workers and/or unconventional organizations, we have been asked to acknowledge the questionable generalizability of our findings as a possible study limitation (see, for example, Bacharach, Bamberger, and Sonnenstuhl [2002: 654]). To the degree this practice is prevalent, it may have the unfortunate effect of appearing to dismiss as somehow less relevant to management theory the majority of people who work in organizations, namely, those who “work in the trenches.” It also dismisses those organizations (e.g., schools, hospitals, social movements) that, although they are seemingly peripherally related to the core mission of the institutions employing the vast majority of us (i.e., *business schools*), nevertheless employ a significant portion of the workforce and offer critical services that many simply take for granted.

### Barriers to Conducting Unconventional Research

Although we encourage doing more research in unconventional contexts with unconventional samples, we would be remiss if we failed to acknowledge some of the barriers and risks scholars may encounter in this pursuit. And although each type of unconventional research conducted (e.g., unconventional contexts versus samples) likely poses unique challenges, we nevertheless believe a number of these challenges may be common to multiple types of unconventional research.

First, there may be issues of relevance. A context or sample can get in the way of others’, especially reviewers’, understanding the theoretical, empirical, or practical impact of a study. For example, such research can be viewed as “too weird” or too far outside of what people consider appropriate for management research. Alternatively, there may be concerns about generalizability—if a context or sample is too unique, how applicable is the learning derived from it?

Second, individuals who engage in this research may suffer legitimacy losses. Scholars are often identified or “branded” by the research they choose to conduct. And to the extent that a scholar’s “brand” is too far afield (e.g., “the drunk worker guy,” “the Amway guy”), critical gatekeepers in universities may have difficulty recognizing the value of the scholar’s research and its relevance to the institution’s mission. The risks this imposes are only magnified when scholars encounter similar gatekeepers, with similar concerns, at top-tier journals.

Third, such research may be difficult to fund. In addition to sharing the biases noted above, funding agencies may also use metrics that favor more tra-

ditional research. For example, given the increasing influence of economics and use of economic models in business schools (Pfeffer, 1998), unconventional research that does not conform to economic principles and paradigms may be a tough sell to granting agencies. Moreover, these agencies are often scrutinized for funding research that is viewed as irrelevant. To the degree that unconventional research is viewed as too strange, research funding opportunities might be sparse.

### So Why Bother?

Given these barriers and risks, why should management scholars bother engaging in unconventional research? First, frame-breaking research of the type that all leading management journals, including *AMJ*, seek to publish often demands frame-breaking research contexts. Such novel and interesting research is often most easily recognized as that which generates an “ah-hah response” to findings that are either counterintuitive or run counter to conventional wisdom. To illustrate, when Bartunek, Rynes, and Ireland (2006) surveyed *AMJ* editorial review board members as to what they viewed as the most interesting management research published in the last 100 years, an article on the Port Authority of New York and another on hospital radiology departments topped the list. These articles—Dutton and Dukerich (1991) and Barley (1986)—are not only interesting, but also well-cited: each has garnered over 1,000 citations (according to Google Scholar). Although such frame-breaking findings may emerge even from incremental studies (those applying recognized and well-studied constructs in previously untested combinations), frame-breaking findings may be more likely to emerge from studies exploring constructs or relations unique to unconventional workforces or organizations. It is in these samples and contexts that scholars may have the best opportunities to observe new organizational phenomena, or to view well-known phenomena in a new light.

Second, unconventional research may help us go beyond the single-loop learning (learning that is based on gaining a better understanding of expected means-ends relations with no real questioning of the assumptions underlying these relations in the first place [Argyris & Schön, 1978]) that is dominant in much of the extant organizational literature. Paraphrasing Hambrick (2005), it is often only by “venturing outside of the monastery” that management researchers can observe or gain exposure to phenomena or relationships playing under- or unrecognized roles in shaping taken-for-granted intra- or interorganizational dynamics. For example, Elsbach and Sut-

ton's (1992) study of two radical social movement organizations and Kraatz and Zajac's (1996) study of liberal arts colleges greatly illuminated the role that illegitimate practices play in enhancing organizational reputations and performance. These insights demonstrate that it is precisely by engaging in such unconventional research that we as a scholarly community can engage in double-loop learning and question the fundamental societal assumptions with which most of us unwittingly constrain our inquiries (e.g., that illegitimacy is always bad).

Third, although academics may prefer to subscribe to the notion, expressed by Barley, Meyers, and Gash, that "knowledge flows from the academy to the field" (1988: 24), their findings suggest that the opposite flow—from practitioners to academics—may be more characteristic of the academic-practitioner relations most important to management theory. To the extent that this idea is true, it suggests a need for management scholars to seek access to a wide range of practitioners operating in many settings to ensure that the knowledge we create is not beset by the same isomorphic and often myopic forces operating on those we study. Moreover, if, as Barley et al.'s findings also suggest, this practitioner-sourced flow is guided by management scholars' embracing "managerialism" (identification with the values and interests of managers), it is perhaps only by engaging in unconventional research that we may run the "reality checks" necessary to ensure that as a scholarly community, we maintain a perspective that is independent of the one we seek to inform. For example, conventional wisdom suggests that routines are most suitable and valuable in stable and predictable contexts, yet by exploring routines in the highly uncertain and dynamic work context experienced by police SWAT teams, Okhuysen (2005) demonstrated that routines and repertoires of tasks can be highly malleable and as such, help team members make sense of and collectively respond to highly dynamic situations.

Fourth, in our experience, those being studied often welcome unconventional research. For example, the dean of a medical school initiated the study of physician socialization conducted by the second author and his colleagues (Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006). Consequently, they were allowed unprecedented access to the unit for several years. Without such continued access, they could not have understood how physicians' professional identity develops over time (see our first point about ah-hah moments). But the enthusiasm shown by those studied in unconventional research has other benefits as well. To begin with, participants may be very motivated to participate, especially

nonmanagers, who may find being the focus of a study "an honor." Consequently, they are likely to have high participation rates. In addition, participants will likely be very interested in the researchers' discoveries, increasing the possibility that the scholarship will have strong practical impact. Furthermore, such unconventional approaches may allow organizational scholars to conduct their research with fewer strings attached and without the need to filter findings through legal departments before reporting the results.

Finally, research on some unconventional samples may allow access to new and sometimes better samples. For example, studying unions and establishing a good rapport with union members and their leaders may allow better access to organization members who may distrust surveys and other research initiatives that come down from management. What incentive do average employees have to respond (not to mention responding truthfully) to questions regarding the frequency with which they disregard safe work practices, come to work under the influence of alcohol or drugs, or engage in "presenteeism" (attending work while ill [Johns, 2009]), particularly when such questions are posed to them in a management-sponsored survey (even if 100 percent confidentiality is promised)? In contrast, union-sponsored surveys may give respondents a sense of security that their responses will not come back to haunt them, allowing for enhanced data accuracy and reliability, particularly with regard to data regarding high-risk or counterproductive employee behaviors.

### **Finding Unconventional Settings for Organizational Research**

Scholars interested in taking the leap need not look very far. In fact, many of the most lucrative settings for management research are often literally in our own backyards. For example, primary and secondary schools offer an ideal, multilevel setting for exploring the boundaries of extant theories and for generating new theory. It is no wonder that some of the most significant and paradigm-setting findings have emerged from research on schools and school systems. For example, although a multilevel perspective is now taken for granted in the analysis of a wide range of organizational phenomena, such a perspective was unheard of until Bryk and Raudenbush, drawing from their extensive research on teachers and schools, published their seminal article on the subject in the 1989 *Research in Organizational Behavior*. Similarly, although countless MBA students whom we have encountered may be convinced that the notion of loosely

coupled systems was derived from an analysis of MNCs and conglomerates, Weick (1976) in fact based it on an analysis of schools.

In addition to looking in the backyard, researchers have many other opportunities to look where no one, or very few, are looking. Large and growing workforces, such as those dominated by immigrants (legal and nonlegal), or engaged via at-will, temporary/contingent, and/or distant work arrangements, are often beyond our reach and hence neglected in our research. These workers, many of whom may be unable to complete a survey even in their own native tongue, may offer important insights into the management of the organizations in which they work. For example, Wrzesniewski, Dutton, and Debebe (2003) described the critical role of "invisible" workers (in this case, hospital janitorial staff) in compensating for overlooked aspects of the organization's core technology (e.g., patients' emotional well-being). Peripheral stakeholders may serve as another distal and hard-to-reach, yet crucially important, data source for a wide range of organizational inquiries. For example, occupational health psychologists have explored the crossover of work demands to spouses (Westman & Etzion, 1995), but few scholars have explored the impact of such demands on employees' children. Indeed, children can be viewed as one of the most important (not to mention, one of the largest) yet least explored stakeholder community in organizational studies (MacEwen & Barling, 1991).

### How to Re-engage in Unconventional Research

A review of the impactful research noted above suggests two main avenues management scholars might follow to begin to re-engage in unconventional management research. Drawing from the strategy literature, we frame these approaches in exploitation-exploration terms (March, 1991).

Exploitation-based unconventional management research focuses on the application of extant theory to unconventional settings to enhance or extend understanding of a given theory's boundary conditions, to assess the practical implications of theory-based interventions, or to, as Weick suggested, support theoretical convictions in search of powerful evidence (2005: 987).

Demonstrating extension of understanding of a theory's boundary conditions, Washington, Forman, Suddaby, and Ventresca's (2005) study of intercollegiate athletics probes the boundaries of institutional theory by identifying some conditions under which association with low-status organizations can actually enhance a focal organization's legitimacy. The aforementioned studies by Elsbach and Sutton (1992)

and by Kraatz and Zajac (1992) perform similar functions for institutional theory by showing conditions under which illegitimate actions are not harmful to or are even beneficial to organizations.

Finally, unconventional settings can be used to highlight the potency or practical significance of theories that, in more conventional settings, would be unlikely to generate a sense of excitement or novelty, as well as to assess the practical implications of theory-based interventions. In terms of the former, not everyone may view a study of the impact of unit-level support climate on employee stressor-strain relations as a page-turner, but when explored among the 9/11 firefighters (Bacharach & Bamberger, 2007), the topic may take on heightened interest. Similarly, though research on decentralization and autonomy as theory-based interventions was well out of vogue among most management theorists by the late 1990s, by applying such concepts to the emotionally charged questions surrounding school effectiveness and educational achievement, Ouchi (2003) was able to capture the attention of policy makers and theorists alike. Moreover, in terms of the latter, he was able to demonstrate the power of Kurt Lewin's famous dictum, "There is nothing more practical than a good theory" (1951: 169).

In contrast, unconventional management research that is exploration-based aims at tapping phenomena that are uniquely or most easily observed in nonbusiness or nonmanagerial settings but nonetheless have critical implications for management theory. For example, Kaufmann and Pratt (2005) studied medical residency programs to provide insight into how malevolent or negative imagery may be used to motivate self-selection and other important organizational behaviors. Such imagery certainly also exists in more conventional settings, but it is often more extreme in unconventional settings. This extremism, though perhaps not easily replicated, allows a researcher to capture constructs and relationships that may be too weak to notice or capture in traditional settings, thus facilitating the development of rich theory. For those wishing to test theories about rare or erratic phenomena, such extremism may, by providing the conceptual fidelity, relational variance, or rapid cycles lacking in more traditional contexts, solve problems of statistical power and data censoring. For example, scholars interested in studying how individual differences affect group processes in project teams may need to examine months or years of data to capture emergent patterns of team member interrelating in traditional, corporate settings. However, just as geneticists study fruit flies to shorten cycle time, a management scholar may use a unconventional setting to explore these emergent

patterns in a much shorter period of time, say by following teams of counselors accompanying teenagers on a six-week cross-country tour. Talk about intense interdependence!

### Tips for Publishing Unconventional Research

We leave you with a few tips for publishing unconventional research. First, don't lose sight of your theory. This advice may be obvious, especially to those trying to publish in a top-tier journal such as *AMJ*, but unconventional research sometimes faces a challenge in this area. As noted above, unconventional contexts and samples can be so salient that they overwhelm the theoretical message. Thus, it is important to remind your readers why your work is important—and relevant—from a theoretical perspective. To illustrate, in their award-winning article, "Keeping an Eye on the Mirror: Image and Identity in Organizational Adaptation," Dutton and Dukerich (1991) first hook the reader with a compelling quote about how homelessness is a problem for the Port Authority of New York. Immediately following this quote is the header "Theoretical Perspective." Over the next several pages, the focus is on the theory they are contributing to, with only brief mentions of their case site.

One way to keep your eye on theory is to ensure that your context and sample serve your theory, rather than vice versa. In Elsbach and Sutton's (1992) study of Earth First! and ACT UP, they do not even mention the organizations by name in their abstract. Rather, they begin by building a theoretical case for integrating impression management and institutional theory. Once that has been done, they introduce their contexts and argue that they showcase the need for this theoretical integration. Rao and colleagues (Rao, Monin & Durand, 2003) adopt a similar strategy by first making the case for the existence of identity movements before moving to their unconventional case: *nouvelle cuisine*. Even if one does not lead with theory, this lesson applies. In his discussion of "sensemaking" among firefighters at Mann Gulch, Weick (1993) only briefly mentions his research questions before launching into an extended discussion of the incident (including his context and sample). He does not mention theoretical concepts until after his methods section. However, once this shift to theory occurs, subsequent illustrations from the Mann Gulch disaster are interwoven into a broader theoretical narrative.

Second, it also helps to "normalize" your context and sample. Thus, Weick (1993) draws parallels between leadership at Mann Gulch and leadership in aircrews. Pratt (2000) highlights the similarities

between Amway distributor work and contingent, volunteer, and geographically dispersed work and compares distributor socialization practices with those of established professions. And Elsbach and Sutton (1992) devote an entire section to exploring how other types of more traditional organizations, such as Reebok and Waldenbooks, engage in illegitimate actions. Such normalization is similar to "naturalistic generalization" (Stake, 1995), whereby one can connect contexts without drawing statistical inferences. Here, researchers who examine unconventional samples and contexts will often draw parallels between unconventional and more traditional samples and contexts to demonstrate empirical relevance.

Finally, unconventional research can use some of the arguments we have used here, such as reminding readers of the role of such research in our field, noting that most people in organizations are not managers, and so on. Researchers may also emphasize the economic and social impact of their work. Bacharach et al. (2002), for example, justify the study of employee problem drinking by noting the performance deficits that are incurred and the financial costs that follow.

### In Conclusion

Because those of us in management "work at the margin between basic and applied social science" (Barley et al., 1988: 24), the role of the unconventional in our research will likely remain a hotly contested subject for many years to come. As applied scholars, we need to remain vigilant about our efforts to be relevant to the managerial community that we seek to inform. However, as basic researchers, we need to go well beyond this community to seek and create the new knowledge that our stakeholders expect us to provide. Moreover, we need to remind ourselves that managers exist in all types of organizations and that insights about business and business-related issues can come from all types of organizations and *must* come from all sorts of sources *within* organizations. Thus, although we wish to encourage *both* conventional and unconventional research, we are hoping for a better balance in today's organizational scholarship. Unconventional research has not only contributed mightily to the foundations of our field in the past, but is also necessary to move us forward into the future.

**Peter A. Bamberger**  
Tel Aviv University

**Michael G. Pratt**  
Boston College

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