

The Iron Cage and the Monkey's Paw: Isomorphism, Legitimacy, and the Perils of a Rising Journal

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The Academy of Management Learning & Education (AMLE) has ascended the heights of management journals in a mere decade. How that happened, and whether perils attend it, are the subjects of this essay. I begin by briefly reviewing institutional isomorphism, arguing that academic journals, as actors in a field operating toward similar ends, are subject to coercive, mimetic, and normative forces. I continue by analyzing how these contextual forces factored into AMLE's founding form and functioning. I conclude by remarking on how AMLE's unique mission rendered it especially susceptible to a headlong hunt for legitimacy, and add a cautionary note for all its constituents—editors, reviewers, authors, and readers alike—that differentiation may not be key to surviving, but remains key to thriving.

In the early 1900s Max Weber (1952) famously coined the phrase “iron cage” to capture how the confluence of rationalism and capitalism restricted forms of organization and practice. The contemporary expression of the iron cage is *isomorphism*. *Iso*, meaning equal, *morphism*, meaning the act of forming. It describes how dynamic social forces come into play in organizations—especially those inhabiting similar environments toward similar ends, that—inescapably perhaps, drive them to behave, think, and look alike.

A key question is what ends those organizations are seeking. Some seek profit, others human welfare. For those that dwell in tradition-bound spaces with well-established actors, a perfectly natural goal is *legitimacy*, that which is lawful, or in accordance with accepted standards. Legitimacy is earned when an organization and its product is acknowledged by reputable sources as adhering to and advancing the values of that field. Ultimately, legitimacy is bestowed by a formal or informal regulating community.

In its decade of existence, the *Academy of Management Learning & Education (AMLE)* has gone from new entrant to must read. In its field—one dominated by Weberian hegemonic rationality and, by virtue of its mission as a management journal, capitalism—it's fair to ask whether its search for legitimacy can be described as isomorphic.

It's the “monkey's paw” (attributed, ambiguously, to W. W. Jacob's 1902 *Harper's Monthly* article). “Be careful what you wish for, for you may receive it.” From its very start, *AMLE* claimed its mission legitimate. In 3 years as associate editor, 4 years as editor, and 5 years as editorial board member, there was no more brash proponent of this cause. Have we achieved just what we sought? And what perils might accompany that accomplishment?¹

This essay explores how contextual forces fashioned *AMLE*. It provides a brief review of institutional isomorphism, arguing that journals operate in established domains toward established standards and are thus subject to coercive, mimetic, and normative forces. It goes on to analyze, from

I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their trenchant comments, Nancy Adler for her support and guidance, and the past and present editors, Roy Lewicki, Ben Arbaugh, and Ken Brown, for their service to *AMLE*.

¹ Having co-midwifed *AMLE* and nurtured it all these years, please excuse my tendency to anthropomorphize it.

my perspective and long-standing association, how these came to play early in the journal's existence. I conclude by remarking on how *AMLE*'s unique mission rendered it especially, but not inexorably, susceptible to the precipitous pursuit of legitimacy.

I make no claim whatsoever that *AMLE* has been compromised by isomorphism. Indeed, the opposite is true. It remains the sparkling prism through which our field is refracted and a foundation for promoting that which has not been so. But upon the dawn of its second decade, it's time to reaffirm *AMLE*'s mission and, ironically, to be watchful of the very forces that gave rise to its success. The qualities that differentiated *AMLE* from others in the field must be retained and gained while being united in vigilance against thinking, looking, and acting like other journals that occupy similar intellectual space.

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ISOMORPHIC PROCESS AND *AMLE*

DiMaggio and Powell's landmark 1983 paper reintroduced Weber's iron cage and isomorphism to the popular lexicon of social science. Like Weber, they too took an idiodynamic-cum-sociological perspective, where actors acted based on larger forces to craft and enact organization practice. Executive decision makers don't operate in a vacuum. Instead, they consciously or unconsciously adopt according to coercive, mimetic, and normative processes. The resulting convergence leads to homogenization. Although adoptive, it's also adaptive. It helps the organization to survive, and, at least temporarily, thrive. There is ample room for innovation, but "in the long run, organizational actors making rational decisions construct around themselves an environment that constrains their ability to change further in later years" (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983:148). The not-so-subtle implication here is to get noticed, then blend in.

Isomorphism is not universally validated, and some might quibble at its application here. But it has been documented in institutions as diverse as banks and universities. And if universities experience homogenization at the hands of coercive, mi-

metic, and normative dynamics, then it stands to reason that their primary source of knowledge generation and dissemination—the very things that elevate their legitimacy—academic journals, can too. Journals are, after all, organizations with investors, constituents, products, and processes that function in larger social, political, and financial contexts.

Coercive Processes

DiMaggio and Powell sum up coercive processes thusly: "Organizations are increasingly homogeneous within given domains and increasingly organized around rituals of conformity to wider institutions" (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983: 151).

Coercive processes originate in the politics of legitimacy, which, as previously observed, comes from authority. In this case the authority—in financial parlance, the investor—was the Academy of Management (AOM). The AOM was at the time of founding *AMLE* the largest academic management association in the world (and still is), publishing three journals, Academy of Management Executive (*AME*), Academy of Management Journal (*AMJ*), and Academy of Management Review (*AMR*), all of which enjoyed sterling reputations. The conditions of the 1998 Task Force endorsing a new management education journal were that it: (1) be an outlet for top-quality scholarship; (2) reflect AOM's mission, and; (3) not strategically align with existing intellectual resources (Bailey, Ferris, Lewicki, & Whetten, 2009: 45). Although perfectly reasonable, these conditions illustrate how deeply and broadly the parameters were set at the outset.

Although never specifically defined, the meaning of "top-quality" scholarship wasn't hard to interpret. It meant that *AMLE* was to publish papers that met the standards of widely recognized top-quality journals, the most proximal exemplars of which were *AMJ* and *AMR*. (It's telling that *AME* is not included here as comparison because it was not held to these conditions. It was designed as a practitioner journal, informed by management theory and research, but not expected to produce original scholarship. The AOM wisely recognized that *AME*'s subject matter and audience did not lend itself to the empirical and theoretical rigor of its sister journals—although it was certainly intellectually rigorous and refreshingly well-written.) It also meant that a whole host of alternative methodologies—although not forbidden—were to be rarely represented, just as they were in the other AOM journals. The implications of this were enormous. The covert communication was that research into management education was to be con-

ceived of and conducted in a manner consistent with an existing set of outlets, regardless of the properties of the subject matter.

That the new journal was to reflect the sponsoring organization's mission posed another limiting factor. Even today, "About Us" on the AOM's website reads: "The Academy of Management . . . is a leading professional association for scholars dedicated to creating and disseminating knowledge about management and organizations" (http://www.aomonline.org/aom.asp?page_ID=36). This is the first thing that visitors—mainly, one would suppose, new and prospective members—to the home site see. To be fair, an ambiguous reference to teaching is made in the official vision. With this is a reference point, *AMLE* was increasingly hemmed in by its parent.

The third condition was that we not strategically align with existing resources. Any good businessperson is sensitive to intellectual property, weary of diluting brands or competitive advantage. This, though, dictated what the journal could be and could do. It forbade us from partnering with another organization that had extensive experience in teaching and education, insisting that the product be entirely home grown. Surely, there could be disadvantages, such as conflict of interest, in partnering with an outside firm, especially a for-profit one.² But there could also be advantages, which were never even to be explored.

From the outset, the conditions laid upon *AMLE* erected the proper precincts of process and product. They effectively circumscribed what it would and could do, and what it should and will be. They implicitly made mandatory that *AMLE* enact, act, and react, as other journals in the field. Precise or posed, directed or suggested, *AMLE* was bid to traverse a predestined path. It was one of enormous benefit, but it may have extracted a toll.

Mimetic Processes

"Organizations tend to model themselves after similar organizations in their field that they perceive to be more legitimate or successful" (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983: 152).

The principle driving mimetic dynamics is that uncertainty induces imitation. Uncertainty means ambiguity, which leads to anxiety and bewilderment. Organizations seek to reduce it, as it renders

them vulnerable to forces outside their control. Proactively and reactively, organizations respond to uncertainty by mimicking or modeling the practices of those in their field that have a proven track record of weathering good and bad—of those who have steadfastly survived.

The uncertainty *AMLE* experienced upon founding was weighty. The first of it came from how to translate the directives noted in the previous section. How exactly was the journal to be an outlet for top-quality scholarship and reflect its sponsoring body's mission? (There was no uncertainty around the third condition of not aligning with an outside source.) As previously expressed, the message of these directives was clear, but putting them into practice was not. It was time for some design decisions.

Because of changes in postal law, *AMLE*, unlike the other AOM journals, was not allowed to accept advertising. This meant that the journal would be a pure cost center. Given the rising capability of the Internet in 2000, the AOM suggested it be an on-line journal. We successfully countered that request, strenuously arguing that an electronic format would separate us from our sister journals, signify that the AOM wasn't fully behind the undertaking, and compromise its legitimacy (there's that word again) in the eyes of the membership and readership.

That being settled, the structure of the journal—its sections—needed to be established. There was no doubt that a heady research section was called for, which we came to call Research and Reviews (R&R), open to empirical and theoretical papers. We were not at all sure there was a sustainable market for one or the other, so it made sense to open it to both. Papers submitted here were of course subject to a blind review process, with the assigned associate editor and then the editor rendering final determination.

A book review section (B&RR) was another common feature of established journals. We expanded ours by adding "resources" to accommodate the simple fact that, in teaching, learning, and education, there are exercises, cases, simulations, and the like, that were germane to our mission.

Exemplary Contributions (EC) invited widely recognized scholars to write about learning and education. It provided a platform for them to turn their acute intellectual attention to the scholarship of teaching and learning. Exemplary Contributions was a stunning success, spawning 3 of the top-25 cited papers among AOM journals in the last 10 years (Journal Citations Report analysis available on request).

² Interestingly, the AOM has reversed this position by partnering with a for-profit publishing house for the *Academy of Management Annals*.

But it wasn't a novel idea. Inviting papers from top scholars is a standard technique employed by many esteemed periodicals to highlight the field's best. An example is the AOM President's parting thoughts, published in *AMR* every year. But at its core, the decision to incorporate EC was a response to uncertainty. We simply didn't know if the best of the best, the colossi in the field, would write for a fledgling outlet with an unconventional mission. What motivation would they have, having already cracked the code of *AMR*, *AMJ*, and other prestige places? By inviting them, we honored their well-earned reputation. But we also brought attention to a new product, moved its readership to read it, and accrued respectability (read legitimacy), all at the same time.

Essays, Dialogues, and Interviews (EDI) was a different story. Dialogue or exchange did occur. Journals had allowed response to articles, and responses to responses, for some time. Interviews, not common, were seen in respected academic journals, although they were almost exclusively of academics, whereas we welcomed practitioners, administrators, deans, executives, educational product companies, and anything related to managerial learning and education.

Essays, however, were unique in that they did not have to be scholarly. Authors were overtly discouraged from presenting novel data (unless purely descriptive), proposing organizing theoretical structures, or charting paths for future research. To be sure, Essays were to be reasoned from sound scholarship, but the idea was a kind of "op-ed" section, where thoughtful academics thought about their research and the teaching thereof. We hoped for rationally (not empirically) based opinion, studied phenomenology, professional archeology, meaningful induction.

I can say well and truly that the anxiety born of uncertainty gnawed at the founding team's maw. At the time, these design decisions didn't seem particularly profound. But that's the point. We responded to ambiguity, largely, by matching the pattern of those that survived it. By imitating and impersonating what was tried and true.

Normative Processes

"Organizational fields that include a large professionally trained labor force will be driven primarily by status competition" (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983: 154).

Normative pressures are *professional* pressures. As a discipline evolves, its participants seek to

distinguish what they do from what others outside the field do. This takes two forms: membership and procedure. Normative forces originate and reverberate internally. They are controls, wise or unwise, put upon the field by the very members who rely on the field for career advancement.

The formal membership of an academic journal is the editorial team and review board. *AMLE* had a balancing act in this respect. Because it was new, we couldn't draw from those who'd previously published in it. We decided on an admixture either of people with a solid track record of publications in major journals, serious credentials in the learning and education domain, or, hopefully, both.

The original editorial team met those criteria. Roy Lewicki and Allen Bluedorn were both, Barry Armandi (rest his soul) was enormously admired in the management educational community. I was, frankly, somewhere in between (and maybe mainly ambitious). The original editorial board was small and hand-picked to reflect these values.

The tide shifted when I took the helm in 2005. Although the editorial team had footprints in learning and education, it wasn't their forte. My choice of five of the six associate editors, Rich Klimoski, David Waldman, Charmine Hartel, Neal Ashkanasy, and Lynn Offerman—all distinguished researchers with resumes steeped in well-known top-tier journals—was no coincidence. The fifth associate editor, Ben Arbaugh, was an impressive scholar and the only one to have a meaningful imprint in learning and education, notably in distance delivery and learning. I doubled the size of the editorial board and populated it with people who were first and foremost management scholars, not management educators. Every single one rose to the occasion, whether as decision editor or reviewer, but it was a radically different profile, one that looked an awful lot like that assembled by *AMR*, *AMJ*, and their ilk.

There was also a professional ladder to climb, a fairly customary one at that. Reviewers who submitted thorough, constructive reviews, on time and reliably, and published in the journal, usually became editorial board members. If that pattern continued, and they attended editorial board meetings at the AOM conference, served on committees and task forces, and practiced the espoused values, they became candidates for associate editor. Editors tend to come from the ranks of associate editors. This pattern of promotion holds mostly true for every *AMLE* editor, and although I don't have data to support it, my guess is that it holds true for other journals. It makes sense; one rises according to relevant experience, proven performance, and demonstrable devotion. But it's also a mechanism for

reproduction of those that earned their stripes in a manner that is to be enforced and upheld for those looking to earn their stripes.

The other element here is procedure. *AMLE* adopted the standard methods of review: double blind with three reviewers and an independent, impartial decision editor whose determination went to the editor for final approval. Rigorous peer review. Hurdles upon hurdles. Most papers went through four iterations from submission to accepted revision. The standard procedure is meant to make papers better. And it does. But it also makes papers look like other papers, especially when a cadre of established professionals are reviewing them along the line that they followed to membership.

Who did the work and how that work was done was a normative process. Early personnel selections morphed into acclimated ones, and procedures were never in question. We professionalized by replicating and reproducing and recruiting.

CONCLUSIONS

My farewell editorial read:

[Our] mission embodies the powerful value proposition that *AMLE* extends to the field. Simply put, management academics should be a prime subject of management academics. We, as a discipline, are called upon to investigate our own organizations so that we can better understand them and, consequently, improve their operational quality and service delivery. This is fertile ground for both basic and applied science. It is laudable that we study organizations in order to improve them, so why wouldn't we do the same for the organizations within which we practice? This value proposition gives voice to an almost entirely novel intellectual space, and in so doing holds forth the promise that one can conduct rigorous scholarship that enhances the excellence of one's own institution. The research, teaching, and service missions of our institutions can be simultaneously and seamlessly advanced to the advantage of internal and external constituencies alike (Bailey, 2008: 450).

Noble words that still ring true, at least to me. Make no mistake, this was a radical statement. To claim that it was imperative for management scholarship to direct its attention internally if it ever hoped to have an impact externally. To imply

that one of our true "callings" has gone unanswered. To maintain that a "novel intellectual space" had been disregarded. To declare that what we did deserved be exalted as an appropriate and authentic research subject. To demand we be granted access to the elite precincts. This was subversive stuff. We wanted to research that that hadn't been researched. We wanted to franchise the disenfranchised. We wanted to inspect our own glass house (tossing some stones while at it). We wanted to be David to the field's Goliath. It was almost romantic. And we did those things, splendidly.

But in the very next sentence I wrote: "The realization of this heady promise faces two daunting, entangled challenges. The first is the *legitimization* of this brand of scholarship, and the second is the *respectability* assigned it in the minds of individual scholars and the institutional reward systems they endorse" (450).

When I assumed the editorship in 2005, I immediately moved to raise the journal's profile. I relied more and more on recognized scholars rather than those with meaningful footprints in the educational domain. Because we were new and expensive for libraries to purchase, I asked editorial board members to urge their school's librarians to subscribe. I also asked them to write established scholars that they were acquainted with, urging them to submit. I applied for inclusion in the *Social Science Citation Index*. Once accepted as a candidate, it's a long process: 2 years of prior publication and 3 of analysis, before the Journal Citations Report ranking comes out. I figured out their methodology, monthly plotting our progress. I canvassed all AOM conferences, looking for anyone who had even a whiff of relevant interpretation in their work and approached them with a smile, a card, and an invitation. I never crossed the line by artificially inflating citations. But I did everything within the power vested an editor to ensure *AMLE* was noticed.

The tension between innovative and replicative was palpable. Using convincing, rigorous indices, Rynes and Brown (2011) demonstrated that *AMLE* meets structural, personal/leadership, procedural, and consequential criteria of legitimacy. The most recent Journal Citations Report Impact Factor, as compiled and distributed by ISI, Thompson's Web of Science, showed that *AMLE* was third among all management journals, with a whopping 4.8 Impact Factor, behind only *AMR* and *AMJ*, and first among all education journals.

There's reason to celebrate. The AOM has another premier journal in its fold. *AMLE* has spurred

research on critical topics that were not well represented or understood in management scholarship. Those whose work has appeared in it can lay claim to having published in one of their field's most select outlets. And those that have shepherded it have reason to be proud and thankful. We've arrived.

In a deep-rooted, tradition-bound space, unknown to top-tier, debutante to dowager, in a mere decade, it's unprecedented. But that's my point. How has *AMLE* climbed so swiftly? There are 166 journals accounted by Journal Citations Report in management, and 203 on the education list, many of which have been around for 50+ years. One reason is the Academy of Management's reach. With 20,000 members, all of which receive paper copies of all its journals, circulation is unparalleled. Another is that *AMLE* was early on fortunate to publish a number of trenchant articles on the state of management education. They were controversial, and as such generated attention, interest, and citations. And there's absolutely no question that the consistently high-quality papers *AMLE* printed had an enormous effect on the field's assessment of it.

Then there's isomorphism. Coercive forces set the parameters. Mimetic ones compelled the design. And normative ones pressed how the process would proceed and who would do it. *AMLE* reaped the benefits of isomorphism. It wouldn't have advanced so quickly otherwise. By thinking, looking, and behaving as respected references in its field, the journal was prepared to grasp the mantle of legitimacy.

The alter of legitimacy, the hallowed halls of respectability, are earned. Earned by diligence and good judgment. But the purchase price can be high. We got what we wanted, but did we lose what we longed for? Did we go from being David to being Goliath? The possible fee of legitimization is homogenization. Homogenization is assimilation and standardization and conformity. Securing the very thing that *AMLE* so coveted—claiming unique intellectual space and inverting the penetrating lens—puts it at risk of diluting what distinguished it in the first place. In this case, the Monkey's Paw is a paradox of competing aspirations. It's the peril of a new journal.

AMLE continues to be what it was intended to be: radical and conservative, rebellious and respectful, iconoclast and orthodox. But it must be ever-mindful that the inverse of isomorphism is differentiation. There are benefits to both. The former lends uniqueness and distinctiveness, whereas the latter lends acceptability and respectability. Though precarious, it's possible to serve both purposes. *AMLE* must honor its inventive, inimitable intent while emulating its predecessor's prosper-

ity. It has to resist the instinct to blend in. It can't let its own success be its greatest liability. It must be as illegitimate as legitimacy allows.

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The path of guarding against the potentially deleterious impact of isomorphic forces lies in the very literature our field has produced and promulgated for generations: leadership and culture. Editors need to walk the rope between conventionality and unconventionality. They need to keep both eyes on the dual prize of disciplinary legitimacy and innovative distinctiveness. They need to override associate editors and reviewers, here and there, to publish papers that might not meet purely articulated academic standards but that make a penetrating point that no one has made before. Editors should grant permission, and I mean explicit and unqualified permission, to associate editors to do the same.

Not much can be done about coercive forces; they've come and gone and will remain. The same holds true for mimetic forces; they are what they are. But not so for normative forces. This is where isomorphic dynamics come to positive play.

Normative processes are professional in nature, based on inclusion and advancement through selection and promotion. Now that *AMLE* has arrived, the path of professional ascension is valued among the AOM membership, and can be defined, and frankly, enforced, in a way that comports with the journal's intent and mission. If these interests are acknowledged such that it maintains the spirit and soul of balance *AMLE* needs to survive and thrive, then all's well. The journal's leadership team can, and should, encourage a culture of differentiation through aligned reward systems for reviewers and authors alike. Rewarding innovation and distinctiveness will lead to innovative and distinct submissions. Culture can be cultivated by leadership, and to the extent possible, codified.

The irony of ironies is that the best way for *AMLE* to retain its uniqueness lies in one of the very forces that could potentially give rise to homogenization. Turn-about is always fair play.

The *Academy of Management Learning & Education* need not be caged by iron or pawed by monkeys. In the confluence of powerful sociological forces described here, actors acted. The AOM,

authors, editorial board, and editors—all had a hand. And they will have a hand. Precarious and subject to sirens' seduction, the key is balance. And that's the key that the collective actors of this journal should often turn.

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