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Guest Editor's Introduction
Controversies and Continuities in Management Studies: Essays in Honour of Karen Legge

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INTRODUCTION

This issue represents a moment of transition in the history of the *Journal of Management Studies*. After being involved with the Journal in a number of capacities for over 25 years, Karen Legge is retiring as a General Editor. We mark this event by publishing a collection of critical essays stimulated by her work as an influential writer and researcher in management studies. Whether as colleague, teacher or editor she has continually struck a balance between developmental mentoring, critical insight, sage service, and a sense of humour and enjoyment for each task she undertakes. Karen embodies many of those qualities we all admire in the very best scholars. Her work is rigorous, innovative, clearly articulated, draws on the broad social sciences and is frequently provocative as it lays bare previous unacknowledged assumptions. In this respect it reflects the guiding principles of *Journal of Management Studies* with which she has been associated for much of her professional life.

The articles that comprise this issue are organized around the central theme of 'Controversies and Continuities in Management Studies'. This theme is particularly appropriate to a celebration of Karen's career, for two reasons: (1) ever since she began her research career with Tom Lupton and Enid Mumford in the mid 1970s at Manchester Business School, Karen has been concerned to utilize and develop organization theory in order to critically evaluate and expose taken-for-granted notions about the functioning of organizations; and (2) the contributions consider and reflect on how the field has developed as a result of Karen's seminal

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contributions, as well as indicating their continuing influence. The articles are written by a number of notable authors, each of whom is intimately familiar with different aspects of her work.

In this brief introduction I have two aims. First, I wish to highlight the resonances between Karen's influential analysis of the power, status and legitimacy of the personnel function, published in *Power, Innovation and Problem Solving in Personnel Management* (1978), and recent debates surrounding the changing nature of management knowledge. Second, I outline the contributions within this issue.

THE PRODUCTION OF MANAGEMENT KNOWLEDGE

In recent years there has been growing interest in the notion that management ideas and techniques are subject to swings in fashion in the same way that aesthetic aspects of life such as clothing styles, hair length, music tastes, furniture design, paint colours, and so forth are characterized by surges of popularity and then decline. Researchers have conceived of management fashions as ideas and techniques that fail to become firmly entrenched and institutionalized since organizations are attracted to them for a period and then abandon them in favour of apparently newer and more promising ones. These have included 'Excellence', Culture Change, Total Quality Management, Business Process Reengineering, Knowledge Management, Six Sigma and so forth. Drawing on Gill and Whittle (1993), these ideas are seen to progress through a series of discrete stages: (1) invention, when the idea is initially created; (2) dissemination, when the idea is initially brought to the attention of its intended audience; (3) acceptance, when the idea becomes implemented; (4) disenchantment, when negative evaluations and frustrations with the idea emerge; and (5) decline, or the abandonment of the idea.

The lineage of the recent upsurge of interest in the notion of 'management fashion' can be traced to Abrahamson's (1991, 1996a, 1996b) seminal papers on the management fashion-setting process. Drawing on the innovation-diffusion literature (Rogers, 1983) and neo-institutional theory (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983), his theory argues that groups of interrelated knowledge entrepreneurs and industries that form a management fashion-setting community, identified as management gurus, management consultants, business schools, and publishers, are characterized as being in a 'race' to sense managers' emergent collective preferences for new techniques. Rational and progressive norms are seen as governing the choice of managerial ideas and techniques. Rational normative expectations are that management techniques will be rational (i.e., efficient means to important ends), whereas progressive normative expectations are that management ideas will progress over time (i.e., be repeatedly replaced by new and better techniques). The management knowledge market creates and disseminates ideas with either rational or progressive norms. The members of this community develop, market and supply these ideas to a wide range of knowledge consumers. Exogenous (i.e., sociopsychological and technoeconomic) forces to the knowledge market compete to shape the demand for these ideas. Thus, within this model the management fashion-setting/knowledge community is viewed as supplying mass audiences with ideas and techniques that have the potential for developing mass followings. Their recurrent discourses must therefore articulate why it is imperative that managers should pursue certain organizational goals and why their particular technique offers the best means to achieve these goals. These may or may not become fashions depending on fashion setters' ability to redefine fashion followers' collective beliefs about which management techniques are state-of-the-art and meet their immediate needs. A management fashion is thus 'a relatively transitory collective belief, disseminated by knowledge entrepreneurs, that a management technique leads to rational management progress' (Abrahamson and Eisenman, 2001, p. 69).

Central to Abrahamson's theory is the notion that management knowledge does not emerge fully formed but is actively produced by a constellation of actors for consumption by a target audience. In this respect the role of the management fashion-setting community is critical. Management ideas, whether fashionable or not, are produced within a milieu which influences their form and content. Like other cultural products they require the coordinated performance of a series of activities before they can appear in their final, public form. The central importance of the management fashion-setting community is recognized even by scholars critical of Abrahamson's approach (for example, Clark, 2004; Ernst and Kieser, 2002; Kieser, 1997).

As indicated earlier, the members of the management fashion-setting community compete with one another to convince the managerial audience that they are at the forefront of managerial innovation in that their ideas offer the best solutions to managers' current problems. We should be under no illusion as to their influence since it is the ideas produced by this community that have come to dominate contemporary notions of management and organization (Barley et al., 1988; Gerlach, 1996; Whittington et al., 2003). In producing hegemonic discourses which structure understandings about the nature of the objects with which they deal (i.e., management and organization), this community governs to a large extent what is valued as management thought and technique. As such they have a huge impact not only in determining the repertoires that are made available to academics and practitioners, but also the choices that are deemed legitimate.

As the production of management knowledge has increasingly been viewed as a lucrative activity, so the market has expanded to incorporate a wider variety of new suppliers. These include a broader range of consultancies, management gurus, practitioners, business schools, corporate universities, government bodies, investment banks and media organizations (Suddaby and Greenwood, 2001). The influx of new producers and disseminators of knowledge creates a vibrant market in which some of these groups are more successful than others. This implies that as the popularity of particular ideas rises and falls so does the legitimacy and status of the occupational community from which they originate. If the ideas developed by one group are perceived to be less valid than those of another then the former will be increasingly viewed as peripheral. If such a situation were to continue then the legitimacy and value of a peripheral group's ideas may be continually undermined and their long-term viability threatened.

Recent research using citation analysis indicates that it is the business schools and management academics that are potentially under the greatest threat. They are found to lag rather than lead the development of cutting-edge knowledge both in terms of when they introduce new knowledge (Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999; Gibson and Tesone, 2001; Spell, 2001) and in what knowledge they introduce (Barley et al., 1988). They are thus potentially producing knowledge that is not only out of date and irrelevant to managerial concerns, but is also derived from a practitioner agenda in the first place. In the latter respect, practitioner communities are exerting greater influence on management academics rather than vice versa. These findings resonate with the notion that there is a fundamental shift in the ways in which management knowledge is produced which has far-reaching consequences for what is perceived as legitimate and of value (see for example, Gibbons et al., 1994; Starkey and Madan, 2001). In one highly influential characterization of this trend the traditional system of academic knowledge production with its theoretical and disciplinary base is viewed as being under threat from a system of production that is more problem/application-focused and transdisciplinary in nature. Gibbons et al. (1994) characterize this development as a shift from Mode 1 to Mode 2 knowledge and summarize it as follows:

> In Mode 1 problems are set and solved in a context governed by the, largely academic, interests of a specific community. By contrast, in Mode 2 knowledge is carried out in a context of application. Mode 1 is disciplinary while Mode 2 is transdisciplinary. Mode 1 is characterized by homogeneity, Mode 2 by heterogeneity. Organisationally, Mode 1 is hierarchical and tends to preserve its form, while Mode 2 is more heterarchical and transient. (p. 3)

This literature raises the possibility that as we enter an era where different forms of knowledge are valued and become more pivotal, the traditional authoritative status of academic management knowledge is threatened as never before. The prognosis is potentially bleak. It is suggested that unless the systems of production and the nature of the outputs change it may become less relevant and its significance could further diminish (see *British Journal of Management*, 2001; Harvey et al., 2002). In this context the challenge is to 'reshape the research system to fit the new environment without losing the features that have made it so productive in the past' (Ziman, 1994, pp. vii–viii). We are therefore entering a period when, perhaps more than ever, there is a need for rigorous, highly innovative, impactful, value-driven scholarship capable of advancing knowledge which balances the interests of an expanding number of stakeholders. I believe that the corpus of Karen's work embodies these qualities (see the contributions in this issue for an elaboration of this point). Furthermore, as she highlighted following a far-reaching analysis of another occupational group facing a perpetual struggle over its status and legitimacy – the personnel function – there are two possible strategies for enhancing a group's influence. She labels these conformist and deviant innovation (see Guest and King (2004) and Townley (2004) for a more detailed exposition of these terms). The former is where a group seeks to demonstrate its value in terms of the dominant conventions about what is perceived to account for success. Deviant innovation on the other hand attempts to alter perceptions of value by gaining acceptance for a different set of criteria for the evaluation of success. Although two strategies are contrasted, it is recognized that in reality there will be an oscillation between the two.

I would suggest that Karen creates a framework which helps to highlight and organize the different approaches that the academic community may take to intervene more successfully in the management knowledge market. By adopting a conformist innovation strategy academics would need to orient their work more to the requirements of the management audience. This implies producing outputs that conform to the conventions of work that is popular with this audience. A major obstacle to such an approach is that those ideas that gain popular appeal express and exemplify broader social trends to which they are inextricably linked. These are far removed from the conventions that underpin successful academic work in its purest form (i.e., publication in a leading journal). Essentially popular management ideas, perhaps best exemplified by the million selling guru books, represent a central feature of communication in modern society, the pre-eminence of the image (Boorstin, 1961; Debord, 1967; Kellner, 2003). During production their connection to a concrete understanding of organizations is loosened as the form of presentation predominates since, in a society dominated by image, perceptions of objects are more important than their actual substance. In the process of fabrication the distinction between what is real and what is not becomes blurred (Clark and Greatbatch, 2004). The 'real' is increasingly replaced by pseudoforms, which are presented as authentic and whose content is governed by an entertainment/media logic. As such this form of knowledge is 'created and disseminated purely for financial profit, at the expense of its truthfulness and utility to varied organizational stakeholders' (Abrahamson and Eisenman, 2001, p. 71). Such values are far-removed from those that underpin highly regarded impactful academic writing. Consequently, only a few business school academics from a small number of elite institutions operate successfully within this market. For the great majority, therefore, this does not appear to be a viable strategy for securing the future of business schools. If this is the case then scholars should be wary of solely following such a route.

The deviant strategy is perhaps that which is more likely to be pursued since it is consonant with the key academic value of experimenting without regard to the relevance or utility of the knowledge presented. In this sense it builds on key academic capabilities and competencies that are not easily copied and so may provide a short-term advantage. It involves at least two core elements. One is for academics to be more active and vocal in debunking the kind of knowledge described above. As Suddaby and Greenwood (2001) have pointed out, many business school scholars provide a due diligence function by conducting academic research that is 'devoted to testing the validity and reliability of managerial "concepts in use"' (p. 936). In this respect the debunking industry may be experiencing some success since the life spans of recent management fashions are considerably shorter than those for ideas which came to prominence in earlier periods.[1] Carson et al. (2000, p. 1152) show that the period of time between the introduction of a fashionable management idea or technique and the peak in its popularity has fallen from a mean of 14.8 years in the 1950s–1970s, to 7.5 years in the 1980s, to 2.6 years in the 1990s. The second element focuses on enhancing the demand and status for academic knowledge. The academic community has it in its power to impact on the nature of the demand for management knowledge by training more critically aware consumers. This may in turn alter perceptions of the value of different forms of management knowledge thus enhancing the position of scholarly management knowledge. But academics also need to intervene more speedily in the knowledge management market. In this respect journal editors have a key role to play in reducing the time articles take to navigate the peer review process. But at the same time this needs to be accompanied by an elevation of the importance of more, good quality practitioner oriented channels of communication. At present only a small number of the journals that seek to bring the worlds of research and practice together are held in high esteem by the academic community (e.g., *Harvard Business Review*, *California Management Review* etc.). Furthermore, the trend would appear to be moving in the opposite direction in that a number of journals that originally incorporated this aim in their vision have gradually become more and more inaccessible to the practitioner. More generally scholars must become more intimately involved with the rhetorics that underpin successful communication with practitioners. In this respect they need to become skilled at producing outputs for a range of audiences, not simply their peers. However the trends noted above eventually work out, it is clear that academics will need to pay greater attention to how they individually balance the dual pressures of relevance and rigour. As this special issue will demonstrate, the reciprocal relationship between theory and practice has been a central concern to the work of Karen Legge.

THE CONTRIBUTIONS

We begin with a piece by Bill Harley and Cynthia Hardy that is concerned with the academic production of knowledge, specifically within the field of human resource management (HRM). They focus on 'how the academic discourse of HRM brings into being a series of practices and understandings'. Whilst recognizing that HRM may have a number of core features (Legge, 1995), they nevertheless emphasize that it is not a fixed set of practices and understandings. Rather it is a site of struggle among different groups with competing claims as to its precise nature and value. The authors select two leading UK-based academics, David Guest and Karen Legge, as exemplars, respectively of the 'mainstream' and 'critical' positions to examine why a particular view of HRM within academia has come to be dominant. They achieve this by employing discourse analysis to discern seen, but unnoticed features of these author's key texts which account for their relative impact. They conclude that the mainstream discourse by legitimising the management prerogative, by drawing on scientific rationality, and through first mover advantage (i.e., telling the story first) has 'increasingly become seen to be accepted as "true" and looks unlikely to be dislodged' from its pre-eminent position.

The second article is co-authored by David Guest, a key figure in the debates surrounding the nature of human resource management and, therefore, someone whose work Karen has drawn on extensively (Legge, 1995, 2001). Building on Legge's (1978) analysis of the condition of the personnel function, Guest and his co-author Zella King ask to what extent her diagnosis remains relevant to personnel management/HRM today. Put another way, how far does HRM offer a 'solution' to the problems identified by Legge. To answer this broad question they turn to evidence from interviews with 48 senior executives. Their analysis is organized around three issues: (1) how far do senior managers accept and act upon the arguments about the central role of the human resource function; (2) to what extent has the relationship between HRM and performance entered the consciousness of senior management; and (3) how far has the advent of HRM impacted the role of personnel departments and specialists? Their evidence indicates that despite considerable controversy surrounding the development of HRM within the academic literature, 'much of Legge's analysis retains its relevance'. There has been little attempt to pursue the strategies described by Legge (1978), other than conformist innovation, and, although the problems facing HR managers today are different from 25 years ago, ambiguities and vicious circles continue to plague the role.

Barbara Townley engages with a key feature of Karen's work: 'the role of managerial technologies and the extent to which they allow for an engagement with an ethical position'. The article uses evidence from a single interview with a senior manager to analyse the justification for business planning and performance measurement. The interview is drawn from a broader longitudinal case study of the introduction, and responses to, these management technologies in a provincial government in Canada. In her analysis of HRM and ethics, Legge (1998) suggests that the efficacy of managerial technologies can be evaluated in terms of two positions: teleological or deontological theories. Townley seeks to relate this work to that of MacIntyre (1988) and his notion of practical reason. Thus in answering the question of what guides the interviewee's judgement of these technologies and their ethical potential, she emphasizes the notion of 'practice'. Consequently she concludes that the interviewee's actions are guided according the 'criteria of competence as understood by a community of politicians, civil servants, professionals, clients and citizens'. Judgements about the relevance and applicability of managerial technologies are therefore embedded within a community that determines the obligations, duties and roles of individual agents. Practitioners' frames of reference on which they base their judgements are intimately linked to the 'standards of competence and morality within an institutionalized life'.

Tony Watson begins his article by noting that Legge's (1978) call for taking a more critical analytical approach to employment management activities, as opposed to a normative and functionalist one, continues to be relevant. This arises because of the continuing emphasis within writing on HRM and teaching of HRM on what *should be* in employment management practices. In order to shift scholars towards what he terms a 'critical social science analysis', he argues that understandings of the emergence of HRM activities need to be firmly rooted within their socio-political context. He proposes an analytical framework which has at its core the notion that human resourcing activities 'are both influenced by, and influence, basic structural and discursive patterns prevailing in the world beyond any specific organization'. Embedded within these are the micropolitical and interpretive work of managers. Out of these processes, and the interaction between them, come, 'in effect, "choices" to develop practices which fall at one particular position or another on the continuum between ideal typical "low commitment, direct control" HR practices ands ideal typical "high commitment, indirect control" practices and policies'. Critically, therefore, Watson highlights the way in which the outcome of micropolitical processes can only be understood through their inter-relationship with the macro-structures and processes operating at the political-economic levels. As he concludes with respect to his case study 'The human resourcing policies occurring in *Moddens Foods* are helping shape the world in which the company exists and, at the same time, are being influenced by both local and global changes in the world independently of these specific managerial initiatives'.

Pippa Carter and Norman Jackson, drawing on Legge's long-term interest in rhetoric, adopt a poststructuralist position to explore what they term the 'mechanism of rhetoric'. This highlights that rhetoric is not just 'a mode of presentation, but is also a process'. By examining rhetoric as a process they argue that its location in the conditions of power can be more thoroughly appreciated. In this sense, the significance of the processual character of rhetoric 'lies in its role as the medium through which dominant discourses are sustained'. The article explores this notion by utlilizing key concepts within 'the New Rhetoric' stream of literature. In particular they focus on the concepts of 'style' (choices the arguer makes in the way the argument is presented) and 'context' (consideration of the audience to which the argument is made).

The final article, by Chris McLean and John Hassard, takes a lead from a paper written by Legge (2002) where she draws upon actor-network theory (ANT) to analyse the network building activities of management consultants. In this she argues that knowledge is inseparable from the rhetorics of persuasion with the consequence that management consultants are '*par excellence* . . . systems of persuasion' (Legge, 2002, p. 80). The authors make the point that whilst ANT originated in the science, technology and society literature it is increasingly being viewed as a useful heuristic for exploring a number of problematic issues within management studies, such as power relations, through the deployment of its key concepts (e.g., enrolment, obligatory passage point, translation, and so forth). Given this development it is timely to publish an article that addresses many of the common criticisms levelled at ANT. Specifically: the inclusion/exclusion of actors; the treatment of humans and non-humans; the nature of privileging and status; the handling of agency/structure; and the process of 'heterogenous engineering'. In examining each of these criticisms the authors forcefully argue that if the theory is to continue to flourish and become more mainstream then the 'challenge facing ANT researchers is to produce accounts that . . . negate the twin charges of symmetrical absence or symmetrical absurdity'.

Individually the papers demonstrate the quality, novelty and richness of Karen Legge's original work and, in doing so, attest to the continuing relevance of many of the issues that she has examined. I hope that the diversity of perspectives represented in this issue will facilitate new insights about these important phenomena. I also hope that this special issue will stimulate new conceptual and empirical research which advances our understanding about a range of topics within management studies and in the process builds on Karen Legge's legacy.

NOTE

[1] Increasing levels of competition within the business media and the management knowledge market (i.e., the speed with which competitors supply compelling alternatives) may also account for this trend.

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