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Abstract

Organizational crises have often stimulated scholarly theorizing that has been productive for our field. Rarely, however, are there opportunities to theorize regarding crises that happen in our own professional associations. A crisis experienced by Professor Anita McGahan when she was the President of the Academy of Management, described in an accompanying article, has presented such an opportunity. In this set of nine brief reflections, several scholars have considered how McGahan's actions with regard to that crisis can be understood conceptually and how they may stimulate development of previously established conceptual perspectives. These reflections make evident that McGahan's actions cannot be appreciated without recognition of the complex dilemmas to which she was responding. These dilemmas include issues of trustworthy leadership, gendered power, leader voice, sensemaking and learning, organizational identities, psychological contracts, institutional leadership, and "good bureaucracy."

Keywords

moral dilemmas, institutional leadership, organizational crisis, psychological contracts, gender, identity, leadership

It isn't unusual for organizational crises to stimulate organizational theorizing, as a wide range of papers suggests (e.g., Antonacopoulou & Sheaffer, 2014; Kahn, Barton, & Fellows, 2013; Kwon & Constantinides, 2018; Pearson & Clair, 1998; Rudolph & Repenning, 2002; Yu, Sengul, & Lester, 2008). Especially with regard to crises, as organizational scholars we are used to looking outward, toward organizations to which we don't belong, for our theoretical stimulation and our empirical data gathering. We are less used to looking inward, to our own scholarly associations. A crisis situation is more intimate when we are talking about something that has to do with us personally. Such events raise new challenges. However, as Anteby (2013) argues, at least when we are able to maintain some professional distance, familiarity with and care for a particular situation may enhance our scholarly engagement with it and our ability to study it.

Professor Anita McGahan's actions as the President of the Academy of Management (AOM) at the time of EO13769, and the interactions she had with others, especially over social media, reflected a crisis. Her actions, which she took from a moral stance, stimulated considerable negative reaction from others, as is obvious in her article (McGahan, 2019).

The crisis she experienced is also very important intellectually. It stimulated novel conceptual thinking, as is

obvious from the responses to McGahan's paper presented below.

The reflections in these papers suggest how the crisis McGahan experienced may be understood in terms of multiple conceptual perspectives that run the theoretical gamut from the quite micro to quite macro. They show how crises may stimulate scholarly thinking in ways that may be very fruitful theoretically, even if not at all in practice.

Although the reflections vary theoretically, virtually all of the papers point to dilemmas present in the events McGahan

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experienced and the responses she received that made it impossible for one action to be seen as universally acceptable. A good deal of moralizing ignores dilemmas such as those she described, asserting largely that there is a particular stance someone should have taken (a stance that of course corresponds with what the moralizer wants). The responses eloquently show how misguided a stance like that is.

There are nine papers included. I will very briefly introduce the questions or dilemmas addressed in each of them. Then I will turn the discussion over to the authors of the papers. The questions addressed are loosely grouped into somewhat micro, mezzo, and macro topics.

Three of the papers focus on the micro level. They raise questions about how the individual leader is perceived and what is missing in discussions of how the leader might act.

Kimberly Elsbach asks, Is making difficult decisions that others disagree with an immoral act or an illustration of competency-based trustworthiness?

Emma Bell asks, If we view leadership as “a myth which functions as a social defense” that emerges in response to situations of uncertainty and ambiguity, are the “violent” responses of a minority a projection of anxiety and helplessness onto a (female) leader?

Costas Markides asks, What in Hirschman’s exit, voice and loyalty model is missing when the person deciding which action to take is an organizational leader? How can organizational change be (successfully) initiated by a change agent who does not have the authority to impose change?

Three of the papers focus on a somewhat “mezzo” level. They raise questions about organization-level tensions and potential benefits of situations like that described by McGahan.

Marlys Christianson and Kathleen Sutcliffe ask, What may be the (perhaps paradoxical) benefits of crises for learning and sensemaking and organizational identity (OI)?

Michael Pratt asks, What is the role of the leader when there are hybrid or multiple views of “who we are?” as an organization? Where does OI properly reside?

Jacqueline Coyle-Shapiro asks, Given the perceptual nature of reciprocal obligations, how do organizations manage tensions between proffering ideological currency to those that value it and withholding it for those that it might offend?

Finally, three of the papers focus on a macro level. They consider the issues raised by McGahan from a more institutional and bureaucratic perspective.

Mary Ann Glynn asks, If an institutional leader is the primary promoter and protector of institutional values, does that empower the leader to ignore or over-ride those values without due institutional processes, even if there is a mis-alignment between the values of the leader and the institution?

William Ocasio asks, Does framing a political act as moral make the act any less political? What type of framing

and acting on the part of an institutional leader most helps develop the leader’s organization as an institution infused with values and moral character?

Finally, Diane Burton and Marc Ventresca ask, Is the AOM presidency a platform for personal moral leadership and/or a professional office with a clearly specified role? Are the ethical attributes of a “good bureaucrat” moral or immoral?

As is evident, these are very important questions for our field to consider, not only in practice (as McGahan has demonstrated) but also in theory. The papers follow below, in the order in which I have introduced them.

The AOM and the Travel Ban

Kimberly D. Elsbach

As I read Professor McGahan’s comments about EO13769, it brought to mind the issue of leader trustworthiness. Psychologists who study trustworthiness (e.g., Reeder, 1993; Wojciszke, 2005) have proposed that this trait has two fundamental components (i.e., competency and morality), and that we use different processes in making attributions of these components. When making attributions of competency, they suggest that we consider situational constraints as potential excuses for incompetence (e.g., was the leader who made a poor strategic decision influenced by bad information?) and view incompetence as a temporary trait that can be changed over time (e.g., a leader can learn how to engage in better decision making). By contrast, when making attributions of morality, they suggest that we do not consider situational constraints (i.e., any immoral act is inexcusable, regardless of the situation), and we consider immorality to be a relatively permanent trait (i.e., immoral persons cannot become moral overnight).

It appears that McGahan’s critics were focusing on her morality-based trustworthiness in making her decision regarding the executive order. As a result, these critics have been very unforgiving of what they saw as an immoral act. But what if we viewed her act, instead, as signaling competency-based trustworthiness (i.e., her actions revealed her competency in fulfilling her role as AOM President)? If we take this view, her actions may be seen as constrained by her situation (e.g., she was constrained by AOM rules) and, even if she was deemed incompetent in interpreting those rules, her incompetence need not be seen as permanent, and audiences may have allowed that she could learn from the experience. One might argue that this may be a more fitting perspective to take on McGahan’s trustworthiness, as criteria for evaluating the competence of AOM leaders are relatively clear (spelled out in the Constitution), whereas those for evaluating the morality of AOM leaders are contested and relatively unclear. This is an interesting issue for debate.

Gendered Power and Leadership Agency

Emma Bell

Women leaders are subject to gendered scrutiny—of their actions and embodied practices—measured against a masculine stereotype of “good” leadership. They are also considered “less likable” even if their competence is perceived to be equivalent to male colleague (Ibarra, Ely, & Kolb, 2013). Neither Tsoukas (2018) nor McGahan (2019) reflects on gender in their analyses of leadership, identity, and ethics in the AOM. As a feminist scholar, I seek to cultivate individual and collective discernment toward issues of gender and power by “taking a stand” against sexism, gendered inequality, and patriarchal oppression in organizations I encounter (Bell, Meriläinen, Taylor, & Tienari, 2019).

I focus here on two moments in these authors’ accounts where gendered power is an unexamined presence. The first concerns McGahan’s note about an AOM Governor who “remarked lightly that he believed it was the first in the history of the AOM in which every Executive Committee member was a woman.” This observation, made in passing at a Board of Governors’ meeting, gives a clue as to the gendered power relations at play, including between McGahan and Tsoukas, as well as between other AOM members who voiced their opposition to the position taken by the AOM President via social media.

The second moment relates to the analogy drawn by Tsoukas (2018) between the AOM President’s handling of EO13769 and the moral duty of directors of Harvey Weinstein’s company to blow the whistle on his sexual predatory habits to protect the human dignity of female employees. Tsoukas (2018) makes no mention of gender despite the clear link between these institutionalized practices and patriarchal cultures. Although it is uncontroversial to argue that the only ethical response in both cases is to “articulate. . . principled opposition” (Tsoukas, 2018), the question we must ask ourselves is how are we to enact opposition ethically and toward whom is our opposition most effectively directed? This leads to a final point about what the authors mean by leadership.

McGahan and Tsoukas both imply a reified view by focusing on the “AOM leadership” and the “leadership agency” of the AOM President, thereby converting an abstract “mental construct into a supposed real entity.” However, if we view leadership as “a myth which functions as a social defense” that emerges in response to situations of uncertainty and ambiguity (Gemmill & Oakley, 1992, p. 114), then the “violent” responses of a minority may be read as the projection of anxiety and helplessness onto a (female) leader—a gendered collective response that reflects and encourages learned dependency.

Exit or Voice Are Not the Only Options

Costas Markides

In his classic treatise, Hirschman (1970) proposed that members of an organization have essentially two possible responses when they grow dissatisfied with the quality of the benefits they receive from their organization—exit or voice. However, loyalty to the organization can affect the cost–benefit analysis of whether to use exit or voice—the higher the loyalty of a member to the organization, the higher the probability of responding through voice (and the lower the probability of exit). Professor McGahan’s actions amply demonstrate this prediction. When challenged to quit the AOM, she provides a number of reasons why she did not choose this response (p. 21), all of which point to her desire to (attempt to) change the organization she loves for the better—hence her choice of voice over exit.

However, whereas McGahan’s decision not to exit supports this prediction of the Hirschman model, the specific actions she took point to a contingency that is absent from Hirschman’s model—what happens if the organizational member is not just any member but is one of the leaders of the organization? This raises the possibility of another possible response option—namely, the option of not only demanding change (through voice) but also taking tangible actions to change the organization. It should be obvious from McGahan’s actions that this is a viable addition to the Hirschman model.

What’s more, the *manner* in which McGahan chose to introduce change points to a gap in the literature on change management. The majority of change models proposed in the literature take the perspective of the leader who utilizes her position in the hierarchy to galvanize the organization into action through a variety of means (e.g., Beer & Nohria, 2000; Kotter, 2012). But how can you introduce change when you are a middle-level manager or a top-level manager in a “democratic” organization where you have limited resources and you are facing seemingly insurmountable organizational constraints—a situation that McGahan was facing at the AOM? Her actions suggest that in situations such as these, we require a different change process—not a top-down process driven by one heroic individual but a bottom-up, decentralized process, driven by the efforts of numerous individuals in the organization. The role of the leader, therefore, is not to *push* change through but to design a system that *pulls* multiple agents into the effort and to orchestrate their actions so that the collection of many seemingly small initiatives leads to major change. This is a far different view of what leaders do to introduce change—one that sees leaders as designers and orchestrators rather than as commanders-in-chief. McGahan’s actions and success in driving change at the AOM suggest that this model of change is not only viable but possibly the best way to change the types of organizations we have in today’s world.

Learning Through EO13769

Marlys G. Christianson and Kathleen M. Sutcliffe

Professor McGahan's case study of her response to EO13769 as the President of the AOM highlights issues of moral responsibility, leadership, governance, organizational change, and strategy. From our perspective as sensemaking scholars, she also sheds light on crises as occasions for sensemaking and learning. It's rare to have a firsthand account of leader sensemaking during crisis and rarer still for the author to be an organizational scholar (cf. Gioia, 1992). McGahan (2019) illustrates how crisis can trigger learning that spans levels of analysis and unfolds over time.

The precipitating event in a crisis can lead to a surge of meaning that can be overwhelming and take time to process (Roux-Dufort, 2007). As the leadership and membership of AOM confronted what EO13769 meant in the context of the organization's policy of no political speech, there were many different interpretations of the event and how it should be responded to. Leaders are often portrayed as active sensemaking guides, but in some contexts sensemaking is not so neat or tidy. Sensemaking is fragmented; it involves other stakeholders who raise issues, produce their own accounts, and propose myriad solutions (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Leaders face many challenges as they manage a crisis; beyond their own sensemaking about the event and its implications, they also have to make sense of other people's responses to the event.

Crises can be brutal audits that reveal organizational weaknesses (Lagadec, 1993). Paradoxically, crisis can also reveal organizational strengths, trigger learning, and potentially lead to a shift in OI (Christianson, Farkas, Sutcliffe, & Weick, 2009). EO13769 revealed both weaknesses and strengths. Responding to this crisis required that AOM leadership addresses the immediate situation as well as makes long-term changes to bolster the organization so that it would be more resilient to future attacks. Organizational learning was instantiated in changes in the organization's response repertoire, specifically the rules governing permitted speech on behalf of AOM. This crisis prompted significant discussion about the role of the Academy. The variety of reflections on the event and how it was handled, the making and remaking of sense over time itself has provided additional loci of learning from this crisis. In this way, perhaps the AOM has learned more about learning itself (Christianson et al., 2009).

Multiple Identities and Leadership

Michael G. Pratt

In the spirit of the article's intent to spur additional discussion and analysis, I look at the issues raised here in terms of identity. McGahan's (2019) case is initially framed as a conflict between *a* leader identity and *an* organizational one. She

frames AOM's OI as singular and tied to its constitution, its NPSP policy, as well as to its other principles. But in articulating the case, she does not view herself solely as a leader (role identity): She is also a moral person (personal identity) who is both a scholar and a citizen (both role and social identities). Articulated in this way, the case raises several interesting questions for how to look at identities—both organizational and individual—and leadership.

As a moral person who strongly identifies with the AOM (particularly in her role identity as president), EO13769 threatened more than one of her identities. However, if she did not see the NPSP as central to AOM's OI, and her role as the President of the AOM as central to who she was, she may have responded to EO13769 differently. She may have done what her personal identity, and not what her role identity, was telling her to do. Thus, we might ask, "How strongly do we want our leaders to identify with their roles, and *if* and *when* might we want a leader's personal identity to take precedent over an organizational one?"¹ The case also begs the question, "Where does OI reside?" Here, AOM's OI is viewed as inherent in the Constitution and organizational values. But OI can also be viewed as socially constructed. Would another leader have viewed AOM's identity differently? Did the sensemaking of the executive board influence how OI was framed? Would the NPSP be seen as central without this conflict, and how does social context frame how OI is framed and viewed? How does a monolithic view of OI square with research that argues that organizations can have two or more, potentially conflicting, OIs? What is the role of the leader when there are hybrid or multiple views of "who we are?" These questions are important for managing pluralistic organizations that value diversity. They are also important for figuring out how to change OI(s). Even if framed as a first step, what impact does changing a policy have on an organization's identity?

Ideological Currencies as a Crucial Dimension of Psychological Contracts

Jacqueline A.-M. Coyle-Shapiro

Psychological contract theory has historically emphasized transactional and relational currencies—organizations deliver on pay and career development, and their members deliver on performance in exchange. A third currency—ideological—has been less frequently studied and thought to apply in only limited circumstances (organizations with a valued social cause and for volunteers). The AOM case study highlights the importance of ideological currency in any organization, alongside the traditional transactional and relational elements.

The reaction of some members to the lack of visible and immediate response to the Executive Order suggests that the Academy violated a perceived ideological obligation to

contribute to “a cause” (condemnation of the action of a political leader that infringes upon scientific freedom). In the words of Professor McGahan, “we need to double down on scholarship” (2018, p. 175) and address when, why, and how organizations signal that they are exchanging ideological currency?

Are these obligations “promissory” in nature and when might the boundaries become fuzzy between ideological reciprocal obligations and universal (non-reciprocal) obligations? What behaviors are manifested in employees fulfilling their ideological obligations? Given the perceptual nature of reciprocal obligations, how do organizations manage the tension between proffering of ideological currency to those that value it and withholding it for those that it might offend? In the case of a professional association such as the Academy that is governed by volunteers, how can it manage the ideologically driven expectations of a global and diverse member base without fractionalization?

Principled Institutionalism

Mary Ann Glynn

Institutions, despite their durability and potency, are fragile social constructions, in need of ongoing maintenance. A critical force in maintaining an institution’s integrity, upholding its core values, sustaining its survival and avoiding drift or opportunism, is that of the leader, chief executive or, as Selznick (1957) puts it: the statesman.²

Selznick, an early institutional theorist in the field of management scholarship, is renowned for his oft-cited observation that “to institutionalize [an organization] is to infuse with value beyond the technical requirements of the task at hand” (p. 17). The task for this falls largely to the institutional leader who becomes the primary promoter and protector of institutional values (p. 28). However, Selznick clearly emphasizes that this does not empower a leader to ignore, over-ride, or abruptly change those values without due institutional processes and appropriate governance systems, even if there is a mis-alignment between the values of the leader and the institution. On this, Selznick (p. 27) is quite explicit. He writes that the institutional leader is emphatically not “free to do as he wishes, to mold the organization according to his heart’s desire, restrained only by the quality of his imagination and the strength of his will.” Clearly, the institution should not unreflectively mirror a leader’s values or imagination; to do so would threaten institutional integrity, making it vulnerable to the whims of the leader of the moment. Rather, the burden of institutional leadership is to defend the institutional values and character, regardless of one’s personal proclivities. This, in effect, is a description of Professor McGahan’s leadership; it was principled institutionalism.

I served as AOM’s President-Elect while Professor McGahan was President (August 2016–August 2017). I can

affirm the veracity of her accounts of key events and her leadership, as she relates them in her accompanying paper. As she passed the mantle of leadership to me, I asked her what was the most important thing for me to remember in this role. Professor McGahan’s response was simple, profound, and invaluable: Always try to do what’s best for the Academy. This was clearly her guiding principle. And it resonates strongly with Selznick’s view of institutional leadership, that of maintaining the fidelity and commitment to the institution’s values and purpose. And yet, leaders do need to be responsive to external constituencies and shifting societal values. It is a dilemma that every institutional leader faces, she acknowledges: “Were I to condemn the NPSP in the name of the organization, I would be imposing my identity onto that of the organization in a way that the organization explicitly prohibited.” The result would have been to threaten AOM and threaten both the legitimacy of the leader and the integrity of the institution. Rather, using AOM’s policy and principles as guard rails, Professor McGahan effected change from within the institution. And for that, she upheld its integrity. I, as an AOM member, am grateful that she did.

Moral Leadership as a Political Act

William Ocasio

Moral leadership is a political act. Moral values are not universal truths and subject to political contestation over their applicability and interpretation. Selznick’s (1957) *Leadership in Administration* is not only an enduring classic in organization theory but remains a practical and living guide to evaluate the politics of moral leadership, not only in theory but also in practice. The controversy over the AOM handling of EO13769 illustrates these political dilemmas vividly, with Professor McGahan, President of AOM, in the role of institutional leader. Tsoukas (2018) accuses her of lack of moral imagination. McGahan (2019) defends herself.

In a way, evaluating the controversy is simple. Is the travel ban a political act, and if McGahan had framed AOM’s response as “moral” rather than “political” would it have made it any less political? AOM is a membership organization, which probably leans liberal and anti-Trump, but contains supporters and admirers of Trump and his immigration policies. So, of course, it’s a political issue. Reframing it as “moral” instead would have been a political act by McGahan imposing her own moral and political beliefs on an institution where some member’s views differ from McGahan’s or Tsoukas’s (2018).

A more complex evaluation considers whether morality trumps politics and when and whether a leader should take moral stances that may do so. Here, Selznick offers a guide. First, the President of AOM is, or should be, an institutional leader, charged with enforcing, interpreting,

and developing AOM as an institution infused with values and moral character. Critical events, such as EO13769, are where values get questioned, reinforced, or transformed. I agree with Tsoukas (2018) that the travel ban was immoral, but I respect others who may disagree. In my judgment, democracy, for AOM, is a value that requires institutional leaders to defend it. McGahan's concerns for the AOM Constitution was and is paramount. Ironically, she could be criticized from the right, and apparently has been, for following constitutional means to take a moral and inherently political stance. In doing so, she followed the majority view of AOM members. In my understanding of Selznick, her nuanced stance embodies the role of institutional leadership in fostering AOM values. She should be commended, not criticized.

The Controversy Over the Response to the Travel Ban From a Weberian Lens

M. Diane Burton and Marc J. Ventresca

As organizational sociologists, we understand the critique posed by Tsoukas (2018) and the response offered by McGahan (2019) as a disagreement over the basis for legitimate authority to act by the President of the AOM.

Students of organizational sociology engage directly and diversely as a starting point with the work of Max Weber, a founder of the field and preeminent theorist of bureaucracy and authority. Weber, analyzing and interpreting the legacy of the second industrial revolution and late 19th-century modernity, focused on the emergence of western-style capitalism and developed a set of analytical tools and definitions to explain the features of modern organizations.

In *Economy and Society*, Weber (1922/1968) drew attention to the mechanisms of power and domination by which rulers secure the compliance of the ruled and defined three alternative bases of legitimate authority—traditional, charismatic, and legal-rational. Traditional authority rests on belief in the sanctity of established orders and received wisdom, broadly understood as a “pre-modern” form of legitimacy. Charismatic authority relies on devotion to an extraordinary individual person and figures in times of crisis or transitions to new rules. Legal-rational authority depends on beliefs in the (procedural) formalism of enacted rules.

Weber understood legal-rational authority as foundational to modern bureaucracy and in turn central to aspirations for stable governance. He further argued that bureaucracy was both efficient (relative to alternatives) and a stable way to organize social activity. Under conditions of legal-rational bureaucracy, leaders and all actors in a formal organization, a restricted category of a social system, must abide by the established rules or undertake a bureaucratic process to change the rules. (For a detailed discussion of domination and bureaucracy, see Swedberg (1998).) An essential feature

of bureaucracy is the separation of the individual person from the office that he or she occupies. People can come and go, but the office has a set of recognized routines and responsibilities that must be enacted—regardless of incumbent. Weber further specified other features of ideal-type bureaucracies including hierarchy, expertise, compensation, written documents, and rules which cover a fixed area of activity and focus “inside” an existing social order.

Reframing the current controversy through a Weberian lens, the questions become, Should the AOM president rely on traditional authority, charismatic authority or a legal-rational authority for official actions? Is the AOM presidency a platform for personal moral leadership or a professional office with a clearly specified role?

Over the century of debates and extensions to core arguments about legitimate authority and domination, three further analytic considerations emerge to enrich the Weberian traditions: That organizations are open systems (Thompson, 1967), full of conflicts and routines (Follett, 1927; March, 1962); that leaders manage complex internal and external stakeholders in the service of preserving precarious values (Selznick, 1957); and that bureaucracy itself can enable action in supple ways (Adler, 2012; Burton, 2001). Reading through these insights, we see in this case a profound disagreement over whether priority actions for a leader should be (a) preserving the apparatus of the organization to secure its long-term goals or (b) responding directly to current context (Etzioni, 1960).

An organization sociological approach to framing and answering these questions starts from an analysis of the AOM as a complex organization forwarding a set of goals for management researchers and teachers. Scott and Davis (2016) describe in their canonical text that organizations are “social structures created by individuals to support the collaborative pursuit of specified goals” (p. 11). How do the stated goals and purposes of the organization influence leader action? How do the structural characteristics of the organization enable or constrain a leader's ability to act?

In the context of these debates regarding the AOM leadership, the question becomes a study in whether the president should prioritize organizational persistence and functioning institutional rules and in how to take actions that recognize the current context and also reconcile with the longer term. As legacy Weberians, we note that the AOM relies on the voluntary efforts of temporary leaders. We point to du Gay's (2000) observation that “the ethical attributes of the ‘good’ bureaucrat—adherence to procedure, acceptance of sub- and super-ordination, commitment to the purposes of the office . . . should be regarded as a positive moral and ethical achievement in their own right” (p. 4).

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1. Perhaps ironically, prioritizing personal over the collective identity is one of the critiques of how EO13769 came about in the first place. However, the veracity of that critique would likely depend on your political perspective—and I would point to Haidt's (2012) work for another interpretation of this conflict. Rather than viewing her as lacking moral leadership—as her critics have suggested—it may be a case of different moral bases colliding.
2. Writing more than a half-century ago, Selznick (1957) used the male pronoun to describe the leader or statesman. Clearly, leaders are not restricted to a single gender but, to illuminate Selznick's points, I retain his original language.

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