

‘Challenging the Disciplinary Structures of Academia: A Performance in Talk-Back and Repartee

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a performance of a prior paper on discipline in academia. The original paper was conceived over 10 years ago and had been submitted and rejected at least 4 times at various journals in organization studies. It described the way in which academia as an institution disciplined academics in their dress, mannerisms, writing style, and other kinds of academic performance. The data for the paper drew from a variety of fictional and non-fictional sources. Reviewer reactions were consistently mixed but in different ways; on the European side, the paper was often described as trivial and obvious and on the American side, over-the-top, caricatured, and unsubstantiated. To enrich the paper, we decided to intersperse selected reviewer comments throughout the original and engage in a repartee with those comments. The resulting dialogue, we believe, makes transparent some aspects of the role of discipline – sometimes subtle and other times not – in the academy as exercised through the review process.

The institutionalizing on a large scale of any natural combination of need and motive always tends to run into technicality and to develop a tyrannical Machine with unforeseen powers of exclusion and corruption. (William James (1903) on the modern academy)

PROLOGUE

We’ve been casting this paper to various journal editors around the globe for over 10 years now, and, prior to now, it had only been nibbled at and rejected or flat out rejected. It is a paper that speaks to the disciplinary structures that surround us in academia – the same structures that seem to obviate the desire for insight into the hegemonic side of academia (Boje, Luhman, and Baack, 1999). It is also a paper that has been reviewed at least 5 times and ultimately rejected each time. Reviewer perceptions have varied widely depending upon whether it was reviewed in an American journal (where we have been told that our paper is mispositioned, unconvincing, and caricatured) or in a European journal (where we have been told that our paper is shallow, obvious, and un-

substantiated). It is clear to us that the thesis of our paper – that disciplinary structures play a powerful role in not only constraining behavior but also sustaining the illusion of freedom – is easily dismissed by reviewers and journals, before, in our view, ever being fully considered or understood.

Rather than present our thesis once again and possibly incur the same skeptical response from our colleagues, we decided to stage the paper like a play where not only the original paper “performed” on the frontstage of this journal, but also where reviewers’ comments and our responses to the reviewers’ comments were brought into the limelight. This approach is like a dialogue among actors in a play, in some ways highly formal and in accordance with the norms of academic protocol, and in other ways, very informal, bringing forth from the backstage of reviewer comments, the tensions that exist among reviewers and “the reviewed” in the disciplinary machine. In this way, the paper has become an exercise in micro-liberation, a way to reclaim

some part of our freedom on the academic stage in the face of disciplinary structures – and of course, it’s always nice as an academic to have the last word. For this reason, you will see the original paper interspersed with reviewer comments, interspersed with reactions to reviewers’ comments, and so on and so forth, much like a game of tennis. Ultimately, of course, even this game of academic tennis is structured and disciplined although, we hope, in a way that, with each volley, the disciplinary features of our profession become a bit more transparent rather than more obscure. We hope to raise more questions than answers in this exercise and have no intention of providing empirical support for our thesis or articulating a “new theory of unfreedom” in academia. Forthwith is our paper and selected commentary in their entirety.

ACADEMIC FREEDOM

As academics, many of us believe that, compared to workers in other occupations, we are relatively free — free in our thinking, free in our research, free in how we schedule our time, and free in how and what we teach our students. The strong sense of autonomy and choice not only attracts many of us to academia, but also, we believe, perpetuates the illusion that academia as an institution is innovative and free from constraint. Using our experiences in America as a basis, however, we suggest that academics are no more free than members of other professional groups — that what Erving Goffman (1959) calls the “maintenance of face,” or a tyrannical concern for appearance as opposed to substance, often drives our activity and maintains discipline in academic life.

Reviewer Comments 1: My understanding of academic freedom is that it refers to freedom over substance and content. The argument here seems to be that there are rules about form and format for participating in the academic scene, both performance rules and backstage rules. (Authors’ response: Yes, that’s it, you have it! We are on a roll now!)

We wonder if much of academic life, like Schwartz’s (1987) totalitarian organization, is oriented toward self-perpetuation, i.e., toward

“working in order to exist” (1987:5) rather than toward doing “useful work.” From this point of view, academics, like workers in a totalitarian organization, engage in a psycho-drama of productivity: they struggle for recognition and promotion out of a desire to fuse with an “organizational ideal” — an ideal which represents a regressive, narcissistic desire to be at the center of an unconditionally loving world. They tirelessly stage and participate in academic dramas, which, in their fantasies at least, they believe will lead to their ascension up the academic hierarchy. From this perspective, the completely “successful” totalitarian organization would be nothing more than a collection of sets in which workers — scholars and professors, in our case — play out scenes in a complex narcissistic drama.

We use the notion of totalitarianism only as a heuristic tool, as a way of defamiliarizing or “making strange” what typically goes without saying in contemporary American academic life. We do not claim that academia exercises the kind of “thought control” associated with totalitarian states, where a central ruling body dictates a party line. But we do want to suggest that aspects of the academy, considered as a large-scale institution, function as a self-perpetuating drama that maintains discipline and subverts new practices and points of view. Although some academics may consciously play upon these aspects, we think that many are unaware of how they affect everyday practices and others simply choose not to think about them. Consider, in this regard, how little attention academics give to everyday academic social practices: it is as though academics did not occupy a place in society, as though they were disembodied minds free to analyze the activities of “flesh and blood” human beings (Robbins & Ehrenreich, 1990).

Reviewer Comments 2: “Not only is this paper totally unconvincing, in its argument, it is totally mispositioned. The paper has nothing at all to do with academic freedom as that concept has been historically used. Academic freedom, which many scholars believe has its inceptions with the founding of the University of Berlin in the early part of the 19th century, refers to the claim that academics are or should be able to conduct research and to teach free from political pressures, be they secular or theological. That is, academics

are or ought to be free to explore the truth and to speak truthfully, in their judgment, independent from the dictates of politics and the church. Academic freedom has never implied that...the beliefs of academics are not influenced by their peers (among others). ...The idea that academics are not aware of the norms and customs discussed in this paper or do not talk about them is naïve, to say the least. Therefore this paper is totally misguided." (Authors' response: We are in trouble now. This reviewer appears ready to draw blood. I wonder why? Have we suggested something heretical here? Have we touched a nerve? Of course, we are free, he says. Of course, we are bound by professional norms and customs, he says. Don't be so naïve, he suggests. But what if these disciplinary structures do more than require conformance to professional norms and customs? What if they constrain our very bodies, what we say, and do, and listen for, and ignore, in the classroom, in the hallways, driving to work, with our children, in our writing, when we make love? What if they live shrouded in our very essence, acknowledged in a superficial way yet desperate to avoid becoming fully unveiled? All the more reason, we think, to make the point.)

Consider a conversation overheard backstage at a conference on literature and philosophy a couple years ago. An excited young practitioner of deconstruction - regarded as a radical method of interpretation - said about a newly acquired teaching position, "After *Harvard*, where can you go?" This person had just attacked a speaker at a public session for not attending to the textual nuances of such terms as "love" and "humanity" - for not treating them with the requisite interpretive savvy. When it came to academic life, however, there were some terms - the terms of the *academic* hierarchy - that this academic seemed to embrace unquestioningly.

EXOTICIZING THE DOMESTIC: AN APPROACH TO ANALYZING ACADEMIC APPEARANCES

At the start of our analysis, we should answer the most obvious objection to our entire enterprise. A critic familiar with the problems associated with all self-referential analyses and statements would say: "You want to claim that academics are driven by the desire to maintain face, to achieve status and power. But what are *you*

doing in this essay? Are *you* trying to increase your status and power? Are *you* acting? Is this essay somehow 'staged'? And is this essay an example of 'real work'? Or is it an example of 'working in order to exist'? In short, where are you, the authors, in this analysis of academic appearances?" As predictable as they are, these questions pose a considerable challenge to an argument of the kind we are making.

In response, we would claim to see ourselves as engaged in the kind of reflective social analysis that the anthropologist and sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1977) has tried to clarify in a series of publications, beginning with his Outline of a Theory of Practice. Bourdieu argues that anthropologists, sociologists and philosophers alike have failed to appreciate everyday social practices. They mistake their theories about practice for practice itself. A sociologist, for example, might confuse the results of a simple questionnaire about reading habits with the *practice* of reading, with reading as it is done by "living human beings" (Mannheim, 1936). That someone buys a copy of Whyte's The Organization Man and reads it does not necessarily reveal how, in everyday life, that person uses knowledge about the book[1]. The reader might use the knowledge as a mark of status, as an affirmation of membership in a group, or as a way of learning more about corporate America in the late 1950's. The point is that people engaged in everyday social practice operate in very subtle ways that unreflective theory often has trouble capturing. Theory, according to Bourdieu, tends to deal with static abstractions like the "statistical reader," while in everyday life people clash and collaborate in the pursuit of individual and collective goals.

To connect this observation to our own analysis of academic social practice: establishing the fact that a paper has been praised by distinguished academics, or that it has a particular intellectual content, does not capture all the ways in which the paper is used in academic life. In particular, we think that the accumulation of "symbolic capital," generated by presentations at conferences as well as by publishing and other means, has received too little attention from aca-

demics themselves. While a major paper delivered at a prestigious conference might redirect the debate about some intellectual matter, it might also produce a windfall of symbolic profit for the author. The two results are not mutually exclusive. Yet for the most part academics tend to deny the profit side fearing that, by discussing the profit, they are reducing intellectual work to nothing but show, to nothing but symbolic profiteering.

Furthermore, we are aware that the difficulty of understanding any practice is compounded when it is *academic* practice that academics themselves are trying to understand. For this reason, we draw as much from fictional sources as we do from sociological, philosophical, and psychological sources, and first-hand experiences. Not surprisingly, to us at least, novelists and short-story writers have noted details of academic life that other, non-fiction writers seem to have missed; because they typically stand at a distance from academic practice, fiction writers often see what academics take for granted and therefore fail to notice[2]. Also humorous fictional scenes are a way of, in Bourdieu's words, "exoticizing the domestic" through a "break with (the researcher's) initial relation of intimacy with modes of life and thought which remain opaque to him because they are too familiar" (Bourdieu, 1988: xii).

Given what Clifford Geertz (1980) calls, the blurring of genres in academia, we are comfortable using cross-disciplinary perspectives, literary insights, and anecdotes to "discover order in collective life" (Geertz, 1983: 21). As Geertz (1980) notes:

The properties connecting texts with one another, that put them, ontologically anyway, on the same level, are coming to seem as important in characterizing them as those dividing them; and rather than face an array of natural kinds, fixed types divided by sharp qualitative differences, we more and more see ourselves surrounded by a vast, almost continuous field of variously intended and diversely constructed works we can order only practically, relationally, and as our purposes prompt us. It is not that we no longer have conventions of interpretation; we have more than ever, built — often enough jerry-built — to accommodate a situation

at once fluid, plural, uncentered, and ineradicably untidy. (p. 166)

By drawing from fictional and non-fictional stories, personal experiences, and a few empirical studies, we have tried to make visible everyday academic practices that preserve discipline in the profession. The dramaturgical metaphor, applied to a social field where people — ourselves included — tend to take themselves quite seriously, helps us to take the perspective needed to gain "outside" knowledge. We submit that, even with this approach and using multiple perspectives, it takes considerable effort to dispel the illusion of freedom in academia.

Reviewer Comments 3: "The thesis of this manuscript seems worth a hearing if the authors can sharpen and clean up the argument a bit. The aim of "defamiliarizing the overly familiar without caricaturing it..." seems most worthwhile. However, at times, I had the feeling that the authors went too far and ended up if not caricaturing at least creating a straw man argument (Authors' Response: Just how do you make the familiar strange without some reference to caricature and exaggeration? And doesn't caricature often reveal more than it distorts, particularly on issues that are invisible and buried deep within the domain?)."

THE ACADEMIC FRONTSTAGE: APPEARANCE, PROFESSIONALISM AND POWER

We are suggesting that what qualifies as "professional competence" — both inside and outside academia — depends as much on one's performance (appearance) as on the message conveyed by the performance (substance). Appearance, we suggest, may be more important than substance in "maintaining and embodying" professional standards (Goffman 1959, 107). A "good article," for example, qualifies as "good" not only because its argument is valid but also because it conforms to certain standards of presentation (Morgan 1985). It performs well, according to the norms prevailing within a given professional community (Fish, 1980)[3]. Like a polished socializer, it uses the right ideas and words, in the right way. Outside academia, it is generally accepted that maintaining the proper appearance constitutes an essential occupational skill — con-

sider “dressing for success” in this regard — but very little sociological work has addressed itself to the role of appearance in establishing academic “truths” or “facts.”

We begin from the assumption that any social role requires some degree of performance or drama — some degree of maintaining an appearance that asserts some degree of power. Thus, to take an obvious case, the police officer wears a badge and carries a gun, displaying the symbols of state power in unmistakable ways. Many physicians likewise wear the symbols of healing power, donning white coats to consult with patients even when no physical contact is involved (Goffman 1959, 164-165). Those who perform low-level service jobs also bear the marks of their power, a blue uniform with a namebadge sewn on advertising a familiarity with home appliances. Perhaps the most obvious and familiar example of the symbolic display of power is the national leader who must be careful not to show vulnerability or uncertainty in public. In this country, the chief of state strives to “look presidential,” as do contenders for the position. Generally, then, a large part of power is a “creation of the brain,” the effect of appearances on the observer (Goffman 1959, 52-55). There is no reason why academia should be any exception to this general observation about power.

Consider a fictional example from Don DeLillo’s (1984) *White Noise*. The protagonist, Jack Gladney, was a run-of-the-mill professor until he created a distinctive academic place for himself: he founded a department of Hitler Studies, which immediately established him as the leader in a new interdisciplinary field. But the college president told Gladney he needed something more, to wit, initials — J. A. K. — in place of “Jack.” “J. A. K. Gladney” was a distinguished name; it commanded respect. Gladney himself added to his new persona a pair of dark glasses and black academic robes, accoutrements he always wore on campus. With his new name and outfit, eyes shaded and sleeves billowing in the wind, Gladney felt an “aura of power” surrounded him.

Hence Gladney had consciously fash-

ioned himself for presentation on the academic “frontstage.” Backstage, he continued to refine his performance. In preparation for an important academic address in German, for example, he struggled to learn the language that had always befuddled him. He learned just enough to give the address and then carefully managed his face-to-face contact with the native speakers who had heard him deliver it. With nods, gestures, and smiles, dropping the odd German phrase here and there, he convinced them he was fluent. Though inept at foreign languages, Gladney excelled at academic acting and successfully presented himself as a German-speaking, world-class scholar.

Fiction, of course, is not the only place where appearance and academic power are closely intertwined. Apparently to compensate for his lack of formal training (he only had a baccalaureate degree and had dropped out of medical school three times), Elton Mayo “furnished his office at Harvard with medical paraphernalia, had his secretary dress in a nurse’s uniform, and allowed others to address him as ‘Dr. Mayo’” (Trahair, 1984 in Weiss, 1986: 22). Appearances can also *diminish* power in academic settings. In his book, *The Leaning Ivory Tower*, Bennis (1973) recounts his bid to become president of the University of Buffalo in 1970 after resigning his position as vice-president in protest of the school’s decision to bring police on campus to quell student disruptions. In talking about how he was perceived, he muses that “images are central to all our political processes” and that his detractors saw him as “permissive, disloyal, equivocal, dreamy, effete, soft on standards.” Pertinent to our arguments, he goes on to mention that, “The ‘effete’ image seemed to arise from a Tyrolean cape (he) sometimes wore around campus” (47).

Consider two examples based on empirical data as well. In a study of writing style in prestigious business journals, manuscripts that were more difficult to read — measured by sentence length and number of syllables per 100 words — were rated higher in prestige by a sample of 20 faculty members (Armstrong, 1980). In a related

study, when 32 faculty members rated easy, moderate, and difficult versions of four “otherwise equivalent” passages, they judged the most easy to read passages as “less competent in terms of research” (Amstrong, 1980: 85). The author concluded that lack of clarity, at least in business journals, is “especially helpful when content is poor” (Amstrong, 1980: 85). We suggest that the use of unintelligible writing, at least in management and social sciences journals, is a sign of competence and power.

Research findings themselves may also serve as a sign of power that can enhance one’s career. Consider the research of William Epstein (Goleman, 1988) in which he submitted a fictitious article to 140 academic journals in social work and related fields. In half the articles, the findings supported the effectiveness of a social work intervention (temporary removal of an asthmatic child from the home to relieve the symptoms of an illness that is often psychosomatic) and, in the other half, the findings did not support the effectiveness of the intervention. Among a broad group of journals, 53% receiving the positive version accepted it but only 14% receiving the negative version accepted it. Findings that supported the effectiveness of mainstream thinking within the discipline were more likely to be published than those that did not. Given the importance of publishing at most academic institutions, positive findings — findings that are consistent with mainstream thinking in the discipline — can pay off in terms of job opportunities, tenure, and academic reputation.

In the useful terms of Thomas Hobbes (1651, 1985: 155), Gladney, Bennis, and Mayo all recognized the connection between honour — possessions, actions or qualities that command respect — and power. To encapsulate Hobbes’s subtle analysis: power is inseparable from the power others believe one has. In Gladney’s case, the ability to speak German is a “signe” that marks him as a serious scholar; he needed to display it along with the other proper signs in order to retain his power as a known scholar. Mayo, under similar circumstances, used his costume to make up for what he lacked in academic pedi-

gree. Bennis saw the connection between appearance and academic power perhaps too late for his immediate purposes. Likewise, academics who do research in the social sciences should be mindful that the language they use and the results they find are likely to have a bearing on their acceptance into the profession.

Reviewer Comments 4: “This is a pleasantly written paper on some aspects of the anthropology of academia. It begins with the claim for ‘freedom’ among academic professionals and shows that they are subject to rules of behavior, dress, and self-presentation as much as members of other professions. The cases seem to be from the field of management, in the US, and the authors seem surprised that Goffman’s observations about presentation, ‘face’, are important to career progress and reputation... these findings are hardly original and many of the ideas and examples have been current in social science for many years.” (Authors’ Response: First you — reviewers — say that our paper is a caricature and now you call it ho-hum. Make up your mind. Or is it both? That because we as academics are caricatures of ourselves, we are both extremely boring and highly eccentric? Also, is it a good thing or a bad thing that this paper is ‘pleasantly written’? Like a stroll through the park on a warm summer’s evening? Perhaps we should have been more biting in our presentation, a “take-no-prisoners” approach with a strong stance against academic totalitarianism. But then what would the anti-caricaturists have said? I suspect that this is one of the European reviewers - maybe it says more about academia in Europe than anything else. Just how do we find freedom among these conflicting disciplinary viewpoints?)

ACADEMIC FACE WORK

The management of academic appearances involves what Goffman calls “facework”: the defense of certain claims about oneself, forwarded by verbal and nonverbal means, in social interaction (Goffman 1967, 5). Academic facework is merely a particular instance of a general characteristic of all social interaction, where people act out “lines” that others support or contest. The Germanspeakers who heard Gladney give his address, for example, did not question his ability to speak German, although one of them could have easily disrupted Gladney’s line by forcing him to stay in a conversation once he had

exhausted his meager stock of phrases. If Gladney the worldclass scholar had been witnessed hemming and hawing in a simple verbal exchange, and perhaps breaking into English, he would have “lost face” and been forced to negotiate a new line for himself. As this example shows, face cannot be maintained by a single person: it is an accomplishment of a social interaction, however small or large. A line, by contrast, is a claim made by individual people, working on their own, to certain abilities, characteristics, values, and so on. A line therefore involves, nearly always, a degree of risk: at any moment, another participant in the social interaction could attack one’s line. This element of risk accounts for a great deal of the excitement at an academic presentation.

Reviewer Comments 5: “The notion of ‘exoticizing the domestic’ which provides the epistemological underpinning for the whole exercise is explicated only briefly and through selective quotations from the work of Bourdieu. These passing references currently seem a bit of opportunistic self-validation (‘frontstage’) through invocation of a Continental authority. Although this is certainly a common intellectual strategy, it rather contradicts the aims of an exercise of this kind”. (*Authors’ Response: Damn! I knew that our Continental Strategy would backfire. Our Bourdieuan-based grasp for credibility has exposed the fundamental fraudulence of our endeavor! The Reviewer is right! We are no better than all the other academics that flaunt their wares on the academic frontstage, while trying to keep their true motives invisible. What do we do next? Employ an indigenous, homespun strategy?*)

Take, for example, the following scene involving one of the coauthors. He was delivering his doctoral lecture at a prestigious university, and in attendance were several highly accomplished scholars from the doctoral program, three of them on his dissertation committee. (In this program, the doctoral lecture is more a rite of passage than a defense, insofar as the dissertation has been accepted by the time a graduate student gives the lecture.) Also in attendance were graduate students, friends and relatives of the coauthor, his fiancé, and a single junior faculty member from the program named Jones (not his real name), poorly dressed and illshaven. The

lecture had gone well, and the discussion period was becoming combative, in the genteel way sanctioned by academic norms, when Professor Jones nearly leaped across the seminar table and exclaimed, “On the basis of what do you make such claims?! On the basis of what?!” He bounced on his chair as though it were scalding his seat. The presenter responded by simply saying, “The basis for my claims is my reading of the relevant texts, as I’ve already explained, I hope, in my lecture.” Professor Jones continued to fulminate, “On the basis of what?!”

What makes this outburst interesting, from the perspective of our argument, is that Professor Jones had not only questioned the coauthor’s *intellectual* claims, but also his *social* claim — his “line” — to be a scholar carrying the imprimatur of an elite graduate program. That a line was at stake, and not only an argument about books, is suggested by the vehemence with which Jones kept repeating, “On the basis of what?!” Professor Jones had a reputation for being intellectually conservative, as indeed the graduate program did, and he was clearly troubled that the co-author did not subscribe to the proper “intellectual politics.”

Unfortunately for Professor Jones, he had undermined his attack both by his appearance and by the manner in which he delivered his objection. In Goffman’s terms, he had “flooded out”: he had allowed his emotions to disrupt a social performance. He had put himself in the position of a spectator who leaps on the stage during a play in order to accuse a character of shamming. As a result, the co-author’s dissertation advisor simply used a dismissive remark to silence Professor Jones, who spent the rest of the time brooding over his embarrassment.

While in this case, then, a listener had failed in challenging a “line” proposed by a speaker, the confrontation nonetheless made for drama. Academic presentations usually include several such challenges, often more successful and skillful than the one recounted here. Indeed, as Prasad (1992) notes, the academic challenge is itself a performance in which the challenger

can brandish his or her facile expertise by, for example, asking tricky or leading questions. Such a challenge offers the presenter a chance to perform some “fancy footwork” in response.

Reviewer Comments 6: “What is needed is more substantial analysis of the particular cases (and probably more) and a more successful piece of ‘making it strange’. Then it would be news. The various fictional, experienced, and reported cases which the authors discuss do not reveal very much if anything about academic life or academic freedom. I am sure there are things to be said, by my belief is that the academic world of (today) is sufficiently self aware and cynical to be in tune with all the things discussed....I wonder if the authors’ own institutions are really staffed with the unreflective faculty members of the type they think would be uncomfortable with this account as a partial story of one facet of academic life.” (Authors’ Response: Another ho-hum response from across the Atlantic. I guess we really are squares here. They **know** this stuff over there; they have figured it out. It is just the dolts that we have to work with in the US that find this work interesting and insightful (but they call it caricatured and over the top.) Perhaps with a bit more sophistication and cynicism here, we too can feel more confident in dismissing this phenomenon as “obvious”.

STAGE DIRECTIONS: THE RULES OF ACADEMIC INTERACTION AND COMPETITION

According to Goffman, all human interaction is governed, in some way, by rules, which we liken to stage directions. In Goffman’s words, rules “infuse all areas of activity” (Goffman, 1967: 48-49). Nonetheless, it takes some effort to reveal those rules, since most of the time people take them for granted and simply keep their behavior within acceptable boundaries — or, in other words, do an adequate job of following the script. But even those rules which people happen to like to follow still constrain and shape public behavior, as evidenced by those times when someone breeches a rule (Garfinkel, 1967). A gregarious salesman may enjoy glad-handing his customers, for example, and see it as an expression of his personality; but when his extended hand is snubbed by a customer who happens to be feeling unfriendly, and the everyday social proceedings are disrupted and the social actors discom-

fited, then the hand-shaking rule becomes evident.

Difficult though it is to reveal any rules of interaction, it is especially difficult, for two reasons, to reveal the rules of *academic* interaction. First, academics themselves seem reluctant to discuss them, preferring to think of intellectuals as free from the constraints under which most social actors operate (Ohmann, 1990). Second, non-academics likewise tend to see an academic career as free from the daily pressures bearing down on those in the business world. Long breaks in the summer and between terms, sabbaticals, few hours per week actually spent in the classroom — to outsiders, all this makes the academic life seem leisurely and easy going, exempt from rules. Our approach of “making strange” reveals academia to be heavily laced with rules, despite appearances to the contrary.

One incident reveals much about the rules associated with academic conferences. Several years ago at the annual conference, an acquaintance of one of the coauthors conducted something akin to an ethnomethodological experiment. He removed his name tag and replaced it with a tag that said, “Nobody” and “No Where,” where his name and institution should have been. He was struck by what little impact his unusual behavior seemed to have on others. One can speculate that while some ignored or failed to comprehend his action, others no doubt deplored it (and therefore chose to ignore him and his message).

In general, academics seem oddly aware of these interaction rules, even though they rarely discuss them in an explicit way. We have noticed that the awareness of rules shows itself in a striking reliance on metaphors drawn from sports and games to discuss academic careers. We recognize that there may be cultural and gender differences in this regard and do not claim that groups from all social categories use the sporting or game metaphor in the same ways, if at all.

From our perspective, there are at least

two elements of the sporting metaphor that make it especially interesting. First, athletic events are generally considered to be mass culture entertainment, while academic work is, at best, highly specialized. The use of sporting slang therefore seems to suggest a desire to “slum” with the *hoi polloi* — to be authentic, without pretense. Second, and this is ironic, sports is heavily laced with rules. That academics do not retreat to metaphors drawn from unstructured activities only emphasizes the highly structured character of their everyday work. Moreover, in American culture at least, sports figures are often likened to performers.

Consider the following conversation one of the co-authors had with a colleague, Professor Doe (not his real name). Doe had often spoken about his desire for academic success, in terms that reveal academia at its most crassly competitive — yet rule-governed nonetheless. He once said he wants to play in the “big leagues,” with “the heavy hitters.” He may not be a “starter,” Doe admitted, but at least he could be “sitting on the bench” and not in the “stands.” At least he could “play a few minutes in the game.”

In other conversations, Professor Doe spoke less metaphorically and more narcissistically about the need for validation. Recently, for example, in describing a panel he organized for a prestigious conference, he looked ahead to having many “biggies” hear his talk. This would be an opportunity for them “to tell him he was smart.” He was joking, but several times before he had made similar comments with more seriousness. This time, he finished his comments with another cynical joke, “And isn’t that what academia is about? People telling you you’re smart?” A deprecating shrug of the shoulders indicated that he had already answered his question. Academia, for him, was about people telling him he is smart, but in order to hear that evaluation, he had to “play by the rules.”

The phrase “playing by the rules” appears too often to be merely a cliché. We suggest that it enables academics to distance themselves from the constraints of academia, while at the

same time, acknowledging that a “game” is being played in which some competitors outshine others. Take, for example, another conversation with a colleague, Professor Kelly (not his real name). Kelly teaches at a major research university, in a department of some repute. The university is known to be rife with tension between administrators and faculty, a fact that Kelly openly discusses and bemoans. Despite the tension, Kelly enjoys teaching there because, in his words, he has “major league” colleagues. “That means that *I’m* in the major leagues,” he observed, “and I like that. I may not *belong* in the major leagues, but I have colleagues who do.” Kelly went on to admit that he may in fact be a “batboy,” but he emphasized that being a batboy is preferable to being a spectator. Like Professor Doe, he was conscious of the distinction between those close to the action, or actually in it, and those “in the stands.”

A final example about the metaphor of sporting competition. One of the coauthors was recently scheduled to deliver a paper at an international conference, but five weeks before the event, the sponsoring body withdrew its sanction, for reasons that had to do with infighting among directors. When the coauthor asked one of the organizers, Professor LePort (not his real name), for an explanation of the rift between the directors, LePort said he was “very disturbed” because the contact at the host institution had not “played by the rules.” Because of his discomfort, LePort had decided not to attend the conference, but he urged the coauthor to attend nonetheless, since the discussant on the paper was a very well-known scholar. This was, said LePort, “quite special.”

LePort’s comment is more subtle than it initially appears. It suggests that the academic “rules of play” do not apply equally to all competitors, or perhaps that there are different rules for different levels of play. LePort and the coauthor are assistant professors, and therefore they must be especially concerned with appearances, more so than established (or, at any rate, tenured) academics. LePort seems to have been “disturbed” because the rift between the conference direc-

tors indicated instability in the structure of power that supported the particular academic sub-society to which he belonged. The power relations had become obscured, and volatile, and LePort was uncertain whether attending the conference would be in his best interest — he was not scheduled to deliver a paper, after all, but only to chair the session in which the coauthor was speaking. Apparently out of deference to the international committee, LePort had for a time even considered canceling the session. *Before* the rift, however, he was definitely planning to attend, so the rift had clearly entered into his calculations.

But the fact that LePort urged the coauthor to attend, *despite* the rift, suggests that, in this case, a discussant's "name-value" outweighs any risks a junior professor might take in attending a "renegade" conference. In fact, merely being associated with the widely recognized scholar, in this game, trumps all other possible combinations of allegiances, resentments and professional accomplishments. The scholar, like others of his status, stands above the politicking in which junior professors and tenured lesser lights must engage. Yet by no means are well-known scholars free from politics; it is rather that they inhabit a different political realm, with different laws and rules.

These differences are variants of a distinction noted by several sociologists between symmetrical and asymmetrical rules (Goffman, 1967: 52). Symmetrical rules apply to everyone equally, regardless of status, and generate balanced obligations and expectations. The rule "Thou Shalt Not Steal," for instance, applies to everyone, from the richest to the poorest. Not everyone, however, commands an honorific title, such as "Doctor," "Professor," or "Sir," and therefore the "right" to be addressed with one is asymmetrical. Take, as an example, the practice of college students addressing their teachers as "Professor," and teachers addressing students by their first-names. In the case of the dispute over the conference, asymmetrical rules came into play: junior professors were required to display their deference to the judgement of the sponsoring body, unless some special circumstance

relieved them of their obligation. That the well-known scholar was scheduled to be a commentator, and was planning on remaining one, created such a circumstance.

Reviewer Comments 7: "Some of the illustrations cited seem to labour a rather obvious point — e.g., the shabbiness of academic dress." (Authors' Response: You're right. No sense beating a dead horse. But how in good conscience can we leave out the juicy details? Is there something disturbing about them? Might it speak to something you are wearing right now?)

THE PERILS OF DISCIPLINE AND DRAMA IN ACADEMIA

Leonard Michaels, in his story "Some Laughed," offers a number of humorous observations on the need to conform to the rules governing academic appearances. An assistant professor at Bronx Community State Extension, the protagonist, T.T. Mandell, is struggling to publish his manuscript, *The Enduring Southey*. The pressures weighing on him are clear: "No published book, no job" (Leonard Michaels, 1975: 151). His manuscript invariably elicits vituperative personal criticisms from anonymous reviewers, and Mandell begins to grow anxious and confused. He thinks: "I went to the required schools, received the required degrees, made changes required by experts. What then do they want?" (153)

Eventually Mandell calls a lawyer who "specializes in outrage."

Mandell told the lawyer what degrees he held and where he had been teaching, as an assistant professor, for several years, as he tried to fulfill the publication requirements of a scholar as well as the general institutional requirements as such. He spoke of his faith in the system. He said he wasn't a troublemaker or a critic of prevailing values but the author of a proper book rewritten according to the criticism of experts. There had been a time, Mandell said, when he wore sneakers to class, but upon noticing that no other faculty wore sneakers, he stopped doing so. There were other things of this nature,

but, Mandell believed, the lawyer had the picture. (155)

The seedy lawyer tells him “there is no action in this crap,” and Mandell continues to fiddle with the manuscript and “play by the rules,” which at Bronx Extension included a proscription against wearing sneakers.

Once the manuscript is finally accepted, by an obscure German publisher, Mandell has achieved something of an insider status, at least at Bronx Extension. Mandell then expresses his status in certain unmistakable signs: “He mastered the ho-ho style of laughter and, at department meetings, said things like, ‘What fun.’” Now considered an expert himself, Mandell reviews other manuscripts, lacing his comments with “uncompromising and incisive hatred” (156).

Although the story satirizes the life of a fumbling academic, it also speaks to the hidden side of academia as a discipline. While most academics might agree that interaction rules and norms of behavior influence how they approach their careers, we are suggesting that the influence goes beyond simply career planning. The desire for membership and ascendancy influences the words we speak, the emotions we display, and, in short, the story we live. It is a story much narrower in scope and depth than many would like to admit. To perform the story well, i.e., to be heard, recognized, and promoted, at least within many academic circles in the U.S., we play at marking our competence through language and dress, muting our emotions and paying homage to our respective fields.

Reviewer Comments 8: “The use of personal experience, anecdote or literary quotes to illustrate particular theoretical points is fine as long as the illustrations are understood to be exactly that. However, when this is the only substantiation offered for such points, the reader does not feel that the points are being advanced or integrated in anything but a discursive fashion.” (Authors’ Response: Discursive? OK, maybe a bit. But labeling experience, anecdotes, and literary quotes as simply illustrative and not substantive in their own right?! We are using fiction and stories to evoke insights into how academia as an institution deeply disciplines its

constituents, contrary to appearances or conventional wisdom. We really have no integrative theory of academia for which the stories and anecdotes might be illustrative nor are we trying to substantiate our claims with empirical proof.)

By “making strange” everyday practices, we have tried to point out the exclusionary, even totalitarian, nature of academia. It is our hope that through awareness at the local level — in local practices and everyday encounters — academics can embrace a wider array of voices, behaviors, and emotions. This will not be easy, however. Given that the frenzied activities of participation and ascendancy in the profession *are* seductive, it is easy to become swept up in this narcissistic drama. This may be especially true for young scholars like ourselves (and the young deconstructionist mentioned earlier) where the desire to infuse new and often richer narratives into academic discourse plays against an equally strong desire to be accepted into the discipline.

THE FINAL ACT?

Despite our efforts to set aside the problem of self-reference, our critic might still have an objection: “Yes, *despite* all that, aren’t you still taking God’s point of view on yourselves?” We would respond that our analysis has no pretensions to being divine: it does not offer *the* definitive analysis of academic practice. Rather, this essay is an attempt to defamiliarize the overly familiar without caricaturing it in the process. At various points in the process, we have had to ask, “Have we gone too far? Does this observation or story really do justice to everyday academic practice?” To close with a quote from Bourdieu, we would say that our analysis of academic appearances is the “product of a long dialectical process in which intuition ... analyzes and verifies or falsifies itself, engendering new hypotheses, gradually more firmly based, which will be transcended in their turn, thanks to the problems, failures and expectations which they bring to light” (7). In other words, this essay, which admittedly began with our own experiences of the academic world, is not the last word uttered in the yet uncompleted drama of the analysis of academic life.

Reviewer Comments 9: This paper is not suited to our journal for three main reasons. First, it falls primarily within the sociology of occupational life and therefore would find a more appropriate home in journals such as Work and Occupations or the various sociology publications. (Authors' Response A: Sounds like the editor sees it as more of a "trade" piece, as if the practices of our trade should be relegated to specialty, that is, fringe status and be immune from scrutiny?) Second, the paper does not address itself to any specific theoretical issues (Authors' Response B: If only Goffman, fiction, and good stories could be as practical as a good theory!). Lastly, the paper does not advance any evidence other than the anecdotal and fictional (Authors' Response C: Why can't our thesis to be deemed worthy and truthful with "fictive" support? Isn't empirical support ever fictive? How much of what we call real evidence is laced with fiction? How much of what we call fiction harbors "truth"? Who is and should be the arbiter of these decisions?)

THE FINAL "FINAL ACT" – WE THINK....

And so ended the story of "Maintaining Discipline in the Performance of Academic Expertise" as it journeyed through assorted disciplinary challenges, fires of critique, diminution, and dismissal before it was ultimately resurrected in a new form and forum. Exercising "academic freedoms" among academic reviewers and editors often exercises radical notions such as the thesis of this paper, in which the depths of our discipline are kept either neatly hidden or disposed of in waste bins with names like "outrageous," "trivial," "unsubstantiated," and "totally mispositioned" – depending in part on which side of the Atlantic you happen to live.

Our question of this phenomenon has always been, why? Was the thesis of this paper really so trivial and obvious? Was the metaphor of academia as disciplinary structure that penetrates deeply into our *bodies* and our *selves* really so far-fetched? Was there something hiding beneath labels such as "unsubstantiated" or "anecdotal" that we would rather not – or should not – examine? Something that we would rather not hear or see or taste or touch?

Time passes. Many years actually. One author has left academia. We think of how we

can resurrect the paper given its proclivity to draw forth dismissive comments. We search for a friendlier venue for this piece. What about David Boje's new journal, TAMARA, a journal of critical postmodern organization science? What about presenting the original thesis of the paper and punctuating it with pieces of our prior reviews – talk back to the reviews and create dialogue, thereby revealing and perhaps undermining some of the disciplinary structures that we have tried to identify in the paper. We can play it as a game, a highly reflective back and forth sort of game.

We send it off and many months later learn that TAMARA has agreed to publish it. Our only review(er) has suggested that the paper be published "as is" (What a relief!) and then proceeds to say that perhaps we have taken ourselves "a bit too seriously" and have not engaged in the "game-like" character of academic life that we have critiqued in our written presentation. ("Play a little!" I think s/he is saying. "Have some fun with it!"). Our approach, s/he says, "doesn't invalidate the paper's argument; it simply makes for somewhat painful reading." Why not painful? Covert forms of discipline are painful, at least for many of us. Incidentally, if others of you in the reading audience feel similarly depressed and pained by our piece, we do apologize for not making it more light-hearted and playful. We actually thought that we were!

A year or more passes and the article sits quietly on a shelf, unpublished but promised for a specific issue – or so the authors are assured. Then an email arrives that says, basically, the paper will have to be published in some later issue – perhaps in a year or two – because of other, more pressing topics that need to be published first. One of the authors goes a bit berserk and fires off a confrontational email to the editor – "you can't do this", "you're going back on your word", "this is exactly what the paper is suggesting", "this is academic hegemony", and so on. Much to his relief the editor agrees with him – the paper will be published as scheduled. The author then apologizes for his "over the top" reactions. The editor accepts his apology. The paper is put back online for more or less immediate publication. And

so the game ends, the paper is published (you're reading it), the authors list it under "Publications" on their resumes, and everybody is more or less happy. And in the end, three or four people read the paper – perhaps thinking it a spoof at first – and some tiny thread in the invisible fabric of academic hegemony becomes frayed and unraveled. Where it goes from there, if anywhere, is impossible to know.

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FOOTNOTES

- [1] See, for example, Lynne V. Cheney, *Humanities in America: A Report to the President, the Congress, and the American People* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Humanities, 1988), where Cheney uses statistics about book purchases to show that people are enjoying "high culture." Cheney never considers the possibility that people might be buying books merely to display them on their coffee tables. See esp. pp. 23-29.
- [2] Consider Erving Goffman's comment about Mary McCarthy: that she is a "considerable student of face-to-face interaction." In *Relations in Public* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1971): p. 27. For our part, we have found McCarthy's *The Groves of Academe* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1952) an invaluable inspiration.
- [3] Fish claims that the academic profession defines truth — or, what amounts to the same, appropriate standards of

scholarship—for its members. His philosophical justification of this claim lends support to our analysis of the self-validating character of academic culture.