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THE EMPEROR'S NEW CLOTHES: HOW OUR FEAR OF SEEMING STUPID BECAME A SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY

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Knights and Clarke (2014) have examined the various ways in which management academics manifest their insecure identities at work. They identify our deeply ingrained fear of being judged by our peers as being an "intellectual phony", who fails to live up to our idealised notion of what it means to be a "proper" academic. Similarly Bothello and Roulet (2018) highlight the prevalence of the "imposter syndrome" among management academics.

Someone with imposter syndrome doubts the legitimacy of their success, discounting all evidence of their merit and ability. By implication they are a lot better than they realise. Tourish (2019a, 2019b), however, argues the contrary, that we are "genuine imposters." This implies that management academics may be right to suspect that we are charlatans.

In *Management Studies in Crisis: Fraud, Deception and Meaningless Research* (2019), Tourish presents an excoriating critique of our field. He has summarised some of his key arguments in a recent article in this journal (Tourish, 2019b). Both are beautifully written, deeply insightful, and profoundly troubling.

Tourish identifies the corrupt practices, complicit institutions, and pointless products that have become integral to our academic lives. He describes how we are proliferating theory in the quest for novelty. He emphasises that we engage in intellectual exhibitionism in an attempt to establish and maintain our academic legitimacy. He argues that much of what passes for, theory in our field is in fact a chimera.

Tourish is the little boy in the crowd who shouts "The Emperor has no clothes!" He is not the first to have done this, even in this journal (Alvesson & Gabriel, 2013; Harley, 2019), but his book is the most rigorously argued critique to date.

The characters in Hans Christian Andersen's story of *The Emperor's New Clothes* can help us understand how our fear of seeming stupid has become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Emperors

First there is the Emperor himself, an apparently foolish man who cares too much about wearing and displaying his fine clothes. It is too easy to dismiss the Emperor as vain and profligate. An effective monarch understands the symbolic value of ceremonial dress, how what he wears can be seen as a material representation of the status and health of his nation, how his displays of fine clothes can be deployed to intimidate rulers of rival nations, and, in the process, protect the people of his own.

In our field the emperors are the "A" list journal editors who demand novel theory, together with the business school deans who privilege the faculty who publish in "A" list journals. Neither editors nor deans want to preside over the decline of their institutions. They need the signifiers of high citation rates and high status "hits" to maintain their institution's position in the league tables. And by protecting their institution they protect us also, from watching the journal in which we have published decline in status, or the university that pays our salary slide down the league tables (with the commensurate decline in resources for our research and quality of our students).

In the commercial world, success is easy to measure in terms of increased profit and market share. In the academic world it is more complicated. A marketplace undoubtedly exists in academia (Tienari, 2012), but our editors and deans protect us from having to face

up fully to this reality. We may recognise it is there—sort of—but attempt to live our lives in denial. In this way we can cling to the illusion that we are members of a noble scholarly profession, engaged in "important" research. We are able to perpetuate our collective fantasy that we are "making a difference," without needing to get very specific about to what or for whom.

The privileging of novel theory just for the sake of novelty, which Tourish rightly condemns, simply reflects the fact that in any competitive environment there must be some measure of success. How else can we tell if we are one of the winners or one of the losers? In most occupations this measure takes the form of material or status rewards. Academics are not entirely honest with themselves about their desire for both: We are after all motivated by our scholarly vocation (Clarke, Knights, & Jarvis, 2012) and the pleasures we derive from perfecting our scholarly craft (Baer & Shaw, 2017).

Yet a research output in a high-ranking journal conveniently represents both a material and a status signifier, being both a valuable commodity in salary negotiations and tangible evidence that we are "proper" academics. It is evidence that we have won "the game" (as Tourish states, by describing publishing as a game, as we routinely do, we legitimize the performative mindset within our field (2019b).

We could collectively decide to stop insisting on novelty in theory development, but we would then need to find something else to privilege, and it is unlikely that we would ever be able to agree on what that should be. Those scholars who have been most successful within the current system will likely lack the inclination or insight to change it. The rest of us, by choosing not to play "the game," or by failing in our attempts to do so, relinquish the

ability to change it. We may have the inclination and even the insight required to bring about change, but lack the power to do so. Lacking access to the institutional levers of power, we console ourselves with individual acts of micro-resistance such as reading and recommending Tourish's polemic.

Weavers

The weavers are the second set of characters in the Hans Christian Andersen tale. They persuade the Emperor that they can create the most beautiful clothes by weaving the very finest fabric. This fabric, they explain, is invisible to anyone who is "hopelessly stupid" or unfit for his position at court.

In the field of management research, the weavers are our preternaturally productive colleagues, capable of churning out an inexhaustible stream of articles in high-status journals. We can argue (behind their backs) that they have little of significance to say, that their work is pretentious and obtuse, or technically proficient but banal. But the point is, they know how to play "the game." A tiny number of our supposed peers are able to achieve levels of productivity that set the bar for all of us, meaning that we too become drawn into their game.

In the winner-takes-all tournament of academic careers, success breeds success. If you are a prolific weaver of "A- list" articles, then a thought becomes significant simply because you have thought it, an article is read and cited by colleagues in your field simply because you have written it. This is how you know you have "made it" as an academic, that you have defined and shaped a field. Of course the need to sustain and defend your position in the field may draw you in to writing a parade of "nonsense" of ever-decreasing interest.

Meanwhile everyone else ends up wearing your intellectual designer label, displaying your latest "must have" references in the introductory paragraphs of their papers, to make the right impression on reviewers and editors.

Of course in Hans Christian Andersen's story the weavers are not really weavers at all. They are swindlers. There is no precious fabric, just a foolish emperor duped into paying a lot of money for something that is not there.

Courtiers

And what about the courtiers in the story? None of them can see the alleged clothes, but they all pretend that they can, for fear of appearing hopelessly stupid and unfit for their positions in the Emperor's procession.

How many of us, on beginning our PhD, have suffered in a seminar or sweated over a book, baffled and anxious that we are not smart enough for our chosen career? Gradually we learn. Over time the obtuse language starts to seem logical and the arcane topics insightful. As we achieve mastery, we too learn to write and speak in obtuse language about arcane topics. We are rewarded with the warm glow of reassurance that we are smart enough after all. If we are successful, and we are rewarded with PhD students of our own, we teach them to experience and then conquer this same fear.

It requires huge intellectual and emotional labor, as well as sustained identity work, to step away from the predefined academic path and cross between multiple paths. To do

research with “impact” on practice, while continuing to publish in high-quality journals and retain academic credibility, takes a considerable degree of intellectual arrogance and sheer bloody-mindedness (Empson, 2013, 2017). It requires you to ignore colleagues’ well-intentioned advice and decide that you are right and they are wrong, in the face of considerable evidence to the contrary.

It is far more comfortable to huddle together in small clusters of like-minded scholars for protection, proving our right to membership of this group by highlighting the absurdities of other schools of thought, and gaining reassurance from our colleagues’ affirmations of our critique.

CONCLUSION

How does the Hans Christian Andersen story end? At first the townspeople are shocked by the little boy’s cry, but gradually they join in and begin shouting “the Emperor has no clothes!”

> “The Emperor shivered, for he suspected they were right. But he thought, ‘This procession has got to go on.’ So he walked more proudly than ever, as his noblemen held high the train that wasn't there at all” (Andersen, 1837).

The Emperor and courtiers disregard the little boy’s cry and continue with their ridiculous procession. We must not follow in their train.

Postscript

After the story of the Emperor’s New Clothes was published in 1837, the King of Denmark gave Hans Christian Andersen a precious ruby and diamond ring, in an attempt to curb his

enthusiasm for publishing political satire (Prince, 1998). From that point onward, Hans Christian Andersen's stories lost their critical edge. He achieved lasting acclaim by writing an enormous number of pretty little fairy tales. What path will *you* choose?

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