

## FROM THE EDITORS

### PUBLISHING IMPACTFUL RESEARCH IN AMJ: WINNERS OF THE 2020 AND 2021 IMPACT AWARDS

All scholars set out to publish high-quality and important research. The attributes of high-quality research have been discussed at length in past commentaries (e.g., the “Publishing in AMJ” series of FTEs). What does it mean, though, for research to be important? One factor in evaluating importance is making a significant theoretical contribution—enriching, extending, and elaborating upon previous theoretical understandings of a phenomenon. A significant theoretical contribution is necessary for a high-quality paper. Indeed, we note psychologist Lewin’s (1945: 129) adage that “nothing is as practical as a good theory.” However, the consensus may be shifting away from a sole focus on theoretical contributions such that research is also viewed as important when it yields insights that have the potential to significantly change management practice in ways that better organizations and society (Tihanyi, 2020).

Although management scholarship contains many examples that address relevant research questions utilizing robust methodology (including the two articles featured below), many scholars have voiced concerns over the relevance of management scholarship to the actual practice of management (e.g., Ben- nis & O’Toole, 2005; Davis, 2015; Gioia, 2021; Hambrick, 1994, 2007; Hoffman, 2021). Through disciplined and rigorous research grounded in real-world phenomena, valid theories should cohere over time so that people can put their insights into practice to address important societal problems. However, absent disciplined theoretical convergence around societally important topics, management

scholarship has come to resemble what Davis (2015) artfully described as the Winchester Mystery House—a bizarre structure with unending and unnecessary additions, disconnected from its environment, and lacking practical utility. A focus on developing theory is itself not the problem. Rather, the issue is how “our standards of evaluation privilege what is interesting or novel to researchers over what is true, or what is valuable to the public that provides resources” (Davis, 2015: 186).

Amid these concerns about the relevance of management scholarship, a worthy goal for journal editors is to publish papers that exemplify how theoretical and practical contributions can be mutually reinforcing and even exert multiplicative effects on one another. Providing strong theoretical contributions can more significantly transform practice and, ultimately, society. And, in turn, theoretical work grounded in societal realities can form the basis for stronger theoretical coherence and contribution. To underscore its commitment to publish contributions that offer both theoretical contributions and practical value to organizations and society, AMJ created the “Impact Award.” This award is given annually in recognition of an AMJ article, published at any point throughout AMJ’s history, that exemplifies the harmony of theoretical and practical contribution—work that, in our view, is “important.” With the Impact Award, we hope to amplify high-quality research that has had, or is most likely to have in the future, a positive impact on individuals, groups, organizations, and society.

So far, two papers have received AMJ’s Impact Award, which was first conferred in 2020. The process for selecting the award-winning paper entails multiple steps. First, a task force comprising several members of the current AMJ editorial team is tasked with creating a list of roughly 10 papers that either have already made or hold the potential to make the greatest impact by addressing research questions that are important for society. Second, all current members of AMJ’s editorial team read the papers on this shortlist and assess their relevance to important societal problems and potential impact. Through

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We would like to thank the award-winning authors highlighted in this editorial—Robin Ely and Blake Ashforth, Glenn Kreiner, Mark Clark, and Mel Fugate—for their vital contributions to management scholarship as well as their support of this editorial, including interviews and helpful comments. We would also like to thank Ilya Cuypers, Katherine DeCelles, Ivona Hideg, Floor Rink, Matthew Semadeni, Laszlo Tihanyi, and Ingo Weller for their helpful comments. We would like to thank, too, Arthur P. Brief, Dia Chatterjee, Dolly Chugh, Aparna Joshi, Kai Chi (Sam) Yam, and Sara Rynes-Weller for commenting on the award-winning papers.

voting, the team further reduces the number of papers under consideration to a set of three finalists. Third, the three finalist papers are distributed to AMJ's full editorial review board. Editorial review board members are asked to read each paper and evaluate its merits. Based on the vote of the full board, AMJ selects one paper to receive the Impact Award.

This editorial offers guidance to authors who aspire to significantly impact organizations and society through their research. To derive this guidance, we sought insights from the authors of the papers that so far have received the Impact Award. Ashforth, Kreiner, Clark, and Fugate (2007) received the award in 2020 and Ely (1995) in 2021. Below, we share what we learned about the research process behind each paper. We then integrate the two award-winning papers to identify lessons authors can apply in their own scholarship.

### AMJ IMPACT AWARD-WINNING PAPERS

#### **2020 Impact Award Winner: Blake E. Ashforth, Glenn E. Kreiner, Mark A. Clark, and Mel Fugate's "Normalizing Dirty Work: Managerial Tactics for Countering Occupational Taint"**

In the summer before college, Blake Ashforth had a series of jobs in which the pay was low and he literally got dirty. For example, he once held a surveying job that involved standing in murky water for hours and, due to a lack of appropriate boots, led to leeches temporarily attaching to his legs. When Ashforth et al. (2007: 149) wrote their article (and some would say even today), the management literature had tended to overlook "dirty work" or "occupations that are viewed by society as physically, socially, or morally tainted." Such an oversight is important to address because the literature might not speak to how employees and managers within such work navigate the stigma associated with their roles. Apart from their own experience with dirty work, Ashforth and his colleagues noted there were ethnographies written on how employees within many dirty work occupations have pride in their occupations and view themselves as heroic. "How could this be so, given the taint in their professions?," the authors wondered, and thus set out to uncover how people manage the taint associated with dirty work. They focused on "normalization" as a way to negotiate taint, which they defined as a "process by which the taint of dirty work is actively countered or at least rendered less salient, thereby enabling dirty workers

to perform their tasks without (or with less of) the burden of stigma" (Ashforth et al., 2007: 150).

Traditionally, qualitative work leads to theory building. But, this article illustrates that not all qualitative research must follow this trajectory. In this stream of research on dirty work, Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) published an initial theoretical article that provided a clear conceptualization of dirty work as a concept and explained how dirty workers construct positive identities. In their award-winning paper, published years later, Ashforth and colleagues (2007) used qualitative methods to derive insights specifically into the role that managers play in normalizing dirty work. Based on their initial theoretical work, the authors classified dirty work into *physically* tainted work, associated with death, garbage, noxious or dangerous conditions (e.g., janitor, mortician, firefighter); *socially* tainted work as contact with people or groups who are stigmatized or have a "servile relationship to others" (e.g., welfare aid, correctional officer, chauffeur); and *morally* tainted work as jobs with dubious virtue or deceptive or confrontational practices (e.g., exotic dancer, psychic, bouncer, collection agent). Building on these conceptualizations, the authors qualitatively examined the tactics managers use to normalize dirty work by interviewing managers from a wide variety of relevant occupations—building trust by emphasizing that they were there to help understand and tell participants' stories. Their findings illustrated that managers perceived enhanced role complexity in that they faced traditional challenges associated with being a manager (e.g., hiring, performance assessment) and used various behavioral and cognitive tactics to normalize the taint of their occupations.

In writing this editorial, we reached out to content experts who cited this work to uncover perceptions about its contribution and practical impact. The associate editor on the manuscript, Sara Rynes-Weller, remarked that it was intriguing due to its focus on dirty work. Dia Chatterjee also noted that the framework provided in the article was useful to apply and understand the taint associated with specific occupations such as policing. Kai Chi (Sam) Yam pointed out that the individuals within dirty work occupations "are not your typical MBA or even BBA students, and it's easy for academics to forget about them. They are out of sight, out of mind. This paper and [the authors'] 1999 AMR help us think of this vulnerable population and ways to understand them" (personal communication, October 12, 2021). This work also illustrates how an occupation or job

can be stigmatized and that the findings within the diversity, equity, and inclusion literature might extend beyond demographic groups to occupations. The challenges of stigmatization associated with dirty work—and, concomitantly, the diversity, equity, and inclusion challenges—might be particularly important to investigate for morally tainted occupations, as morally tainted work was viewed as dirtier than physically and socially tainted work. As the authors noted: “Physically and socially tainted work may be seen as more necessary than evil, whereas morally tainted work may be seen as more evil—and therefore dirtier—than necessary” (Ashforth et al., 2007: 153).

The committee that picked this paper to receive the Impact Award in 2020 echoed these sentiments. The committee selected this article because it highlights the difficulties of a workforce often ignored by both society and management researchers. Ashforth and colleagues (2007) brought the voices, struggles, and work experiences of stigmatized workers into the forefront of management research through a beautifully crafted, impactful piece.

### **2021 Impact Award Winner: Robin J. Ely’s “The Power in Demography: Women’s Social Constructions of Gender Identity at Work”**

Robin Ely’s (1995) article on women’s social constructions of gender identity at work exemplifies work that has made tremendous contributions to both management research and practice. Ely’s dissertation, of which this paper was part (see also Ely, 1994), aimed to understand how organizational contexts and the degree to which women hold positions of power shape women’s sense of what it means to be a woman (i.e., their gender identity). And to further understand how gender identity, in turn, influences the nature of competition and support in relationships among junior professional women. Her motivation for this work came from her own professional experiences prior to and during graduate school, where she observed tremendous variability in how women at work treated one another, from treatment consistent with the gender stereotype of women being highly competitive with one another to the opposite—women being incredibly supportive of one another. Inspired by Kanter’s (1977) influential work on how organizational demography affects gender dynamics in the workplace, Ely embarked on a dissertation to understand the impact of women’s proportional representation in an organization’s upper echelons, which she saw as an indicator of

women’s power, on the emotional lives of women at work. A key guiding proposition for her was that women’s power—not ostensible traits associated with being a woman—would socially construct the meaning of gender in the workplace, which in turn would affect how women relate to one another. Upon advice from a faculty member in her first job, she split her dissertation into two key pieces. In the first, Ely (1994) examined women’s relationships at work, while her award-winning article in *AMJ* unpacked the mechanism by probing the role of power in socially constructing the meaning of gender at work (Ely, 1995).

In reflecting on this work, Ely noted that a guiding light for her research then and now has been focusing on what she is passionate about in the real world—of finding questions to enlighten the world about where she thought the world was wrong. A particular pet peeve is the stickiness of gender stereotypes and the widespread belief in fundamental trait differences between women and men. In this particular line of work, she wanted to challenge the assumption that women struggle to get along with other women by depersonalizing this notion and showing how organizational context can make or break the quality of relationships between women at work through altering their gender identity. At the same time, this study challenged the assumption that gender identity is fixed, commensurate with assigned sex at birth, by showing how it is associated with the degree to which women hold positions of organizational power. She then discussed the joy of the iterative puzzling process of bringing her qualitative findings into a meaningful dialogue with the theoretical and empirical literatures. She noted that this would not have been possible without the support of many others, especially her research group, which included Herminia Ibarra, Maureen Scully, and several other Boston-area assistant professors, who helped her think through each iteration of the paper every step of the way, as well as Jane Dutton, who showed her how to navigate the revision process. Ely underscored the value of having many groups of collaborators and thought partners, with different groups serving different functions, because impactful research requires input from different people in different contexts.

When asked if she knew this work would be impactful, Ely said the award truly surprised her and noted the irony of having been given the advice in graduate school to not take up this topic for her dissertation. Gender was not seen as a viable topic for getting a job in academia and certainly not for getting tenure; gender identity was of little interest to the

mainstream, and relationships among women were even less so. Although a part of her job talk, she did not take this paper on the academic circuit for conferences or talks. Post-publication, she, however, regularly described the findings to executive and other practitioner audiences, especially audiences of professional women. In addition to the challenge of pursuing this topic, she also noted a lack of mentorship, professional training on how to publish at the time, and even access to resources. The sample size for her survey was limited by photocopying costs and how many stamps she could afford at the time to send out surveys and stamped envelopes for responses!

In thinking through why this paper did end up having the traction it did, Ely suspected that it was because the problem the paper highlights has yet to be addressed—women are still not represented in the upper echelons of organizations. She noted that, while the number of female lawyers has increased, the numbers of female lawyers in the high end of large law firms (such as in the partner role), which constituted her sample 30 years ago, still peaks at about 15% to 20%. Additionally, beyond speaking to a large and long-lasting societal challenge, Ely observed that impactful papers seem often to have qualitative components. When findings are revealed through stories that are relatable and interesting, qualitative data can make papers especially compelling and memorable—in ways that may be more difficult for quantitative papers to achieve.

According to content experts such as Aparna Joshi:

The paper had a formative influence on doctoral students (like myself) who, in the late 1990s, wanted to examine how organizational level factors seeped into individual and interpersonal gender identity processes. It was one of the early papers to highlight the role of organizational context on diversity outcomes at the individual and interpersonal levels of analysis, which was a novel view in the [organizational behavior] area. (Personal communication, October 13, 2021)

From Dolly Chugh's perspective:

Robin Ely's (1995) paper was ahead of its time and on brand for this patient, brilliant, tenacious scholar. The work teases apart sex and gender, nudging management scholars to do the same, and highlights the importance of context (e.g., the demographics of an organization) on how women constructed their identities. (Personal communication, October 12, 2021)

Arthur Brief observed:

Very cleverly integrating qualitative and quantitative methods, Robin demonstrated that sex and gender are

not equivalent constructs, a lesson most contemporary management scholars seemed not to have learned. She also showed us that the association between sex and gender, for women at least, varies as a function of organizational context—in her case, the proportion of women in senior roles. More pragmatically, she demonstrated that having women in power is helpful to those women hierarchically beneath them. The piece set a research agenda that more than 20 years later is still worthy of attention. (Personal communication, October 14, 2021)

The Impact Award selection committee for AMJ agreed. It highlighted the importance of this article in pioneering the understanding of gender in organizations as a socially constructed identity, not an objective quality, and created and sustained by power asymmetries. Not only did the paper launch the study of the social construction of gender identity at work, it also helped fuel drives in practice to treat gender as an identity-based, non-binary construct, with implications for assessment, culture, and training and development in organizations. Additionally, the article documented with mixed methods how representation in the hierarchy changes people's reliance on stereotypes. This work was pivotal in helping accelerate research and spark societal dialogue on the role of representation in organizations, including required gender quotas for political institutions in Europe and corporate boards around the world. Finally, the results of this article showed that sex roles were more stereotypical and problematic in law firms with fewer senior women, highlighting the importance of gender audits to fix the "leaky pipeline" in organizations and the need for support for token and/or underrepresented groups at both lower and higher organizational ranks.

#### DEVELOPING RESEARCH WITH IMPACT: LESSONS LEARNED

Prior authors have provided invaluable advice about how to publish research that shapes the academic conversation on a topic, thereby having scholarly impact (e.g., Ashford, 2013). To complement that advice, we offer a set of lessons gleaned from Ashforth and colleagues (2007) and Ely (1995) about how to publish research that has practical impact.

#### Understand a Phenomenon through the Eyes of the Worker

It is notable, though not surprising (Gioia, 2021), that both papers that have received AMJ's

Impact Award report the results of qualitative investigations. One methodological approach (e.g., qualitative or quantitative) or research area (e.g., micro vs. macro) is not inherently more impactful than another type. However, as Ely noted, qualitative methods supply researchers with the rich details that make it easier to clearly and vividly depict a phenomenon. This may be because qualitative methods require researchers to confront a phenomenon through the eyes of those who are living and experiencing it themselves. When using qualitative methods, researchers are quite literally face to face with the subject of investigation.

The lesson here is not to adopt and rely solely on qualitative methods when studying organizations. Rather, the lesson is to invest time and effort in understanding a phenomenon, ideally through the eyes of the people who directly experience or are impacted by it. This can take place at multiple phases of a research project. For instance, both author teams were inspired by their own experiences at work. In other words, they were their first subjects. Of course, one need not experience something directly to understand it deeply. Consider, for example, a researcher interested in studying the emergence of “entrepreneurial ecosystems” using large-scale, archival data. In the early stages of the project, spending time in conversation with entrepreneurs about how they choose where to locate their firms or what kind of support and resources they most value can contextualize and make concrete an archival data source. In the later stages of the project, the researcher might draft a clear and concise explanation of key findings. This memo, then, can be the basis of further conversations with entrepreneurs, investors, policy makers, and government leaders. Active engagement with individuals, groups, and organizations who have experienced and were impacted by the phenomenon makes it such that research is more likely to influence practitioners and society (e.g., *Responsible Research in Business & Management*, 2017). Circling back and asking how they would interpret the findings, what is most important about the findings, and whether the researcher should ask other questions can tighten the link between theoretical contribution and practical importance. By taking these kinds of steps, a researcher—even one who has relied solely on quantitative methods in a publication—can elevate the real-world relevance and value of management scholarship (see also Ichniowski & Shaw, 2013).

### **Approach—Don’t Avoid—Studying Overlooked People and Organizations**

These two papers have had, and will continue to have, significant practical impact because they illuminated the unique work experiences of people who were or are overlooked and underrepresented by management theory and research. The occupations that Ashforth and colleagues (2007) sampled in their empirical work—including exterminators, morticians, and abortion clinic staff—are not the kinds of occupations that are the focus of case discussions in a typical MBA classroom. The kinds of people that Ely (1995) sampled in her empirical work—women—are also (embarrassingly) rarely the focus of case discussions in a typical MBA classroom (Symons & Ibarra, 2014). Much like they have been omitted from the management classroom, so too have the experiences of dirty workers and women been poorly represented within management theory and research. Management theory and research can never have true relevance if it fails to speak to the full range of people who are engaged in work. By shining a spotlight on the unique experiences of marginalized and/or overlooked people, the Impact Award winners pulled management as a field closer to the vibrant and diverse “real world” that it seeks to understand. And yet the award winners mentioned that embracing the “real-world”—and deviating from studying the kinds of workers who have traditionally been the focus of research—entailed risk.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

More than two decades ago, environmental scientist Lubchenco (1998: 491) challenged publicly funded researchers to re-envision their contract with society and “devote their energies and talents to the most pressing problems of the day, in proportion to their importance.” This mandate has only increased in importance in the years since, including the importance for research in management to help understand and address societal and organizational problems. Although it can be challenging to predict how any one paper might impact future scholarship, as scholars, we must attempt to predict how our findings might be used by others. Doing work that is relevant and important for society may not be captured by traditional objective metrics, and, at times, requires “exhaustive and effective” public discourse about the ethical ramifications of science while acknowledging and confronting difficult societal, financial, and political trade-offs (“Genome Editing,” 2017: 625; see also Scheufele, Hoffman, Neeley, & Reid,

2021). Yet, it is our hope that scholars, and those who advise and mentor them, will demonstrate the courage and risk-taking needed to do the kind of transformative work that our society needs, perhaps now more than ever.

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