

Dialogue, Debate, and Discussion

Walking with a Giant: In Memory of My *Enshi* James G. March

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As my mentor and my sole dissertation advisor, James March, or Jim as I remember him, was essential in shaping my views on the fundamental issues of organization studies. He had a great, agile mind that was capable of pushing beyond any limits. More importantly, he was a good teacher to me. He nurtured his students to grow in his unique ways. I remember Jim's students often meeting with him for private discussions. In the spring of 1999, I began my own near weekly discussions with him. The talks varied across academic topics and ideas. They went on until the year 2003, the year I graduated from Stanford. Many of my meetings with Jim were of the brainstorming sort: they produced no 'tangible' or 'publishable' results, but they shaped my thinking and helped me mature into the type of academic standards deemed appropriate by Jim.

Aside from those weekly meetings and the painful, yet fruitful, dissertation process, I closely worked with Jim during our project related to the evolution of the field for organization studies. The paper, 'Notes on the evolution of a research community: Organization studies in Anglophone North America, 1945–2000', was later published in 2005 in *Organization Science* (Augier, March, & Sullivan, 2005). I was also honored to witness (as a liaison, somewhat) to the formation and publication in 2005 of Jim's MOR paper 'Parochialism in the Evolution of a Research Community: The Case of Organization Studies' (March, 2005). While published earlier than our evolution of the field project, the MOR piece was an extension of the research we were doing for the evolution paper.

Jim's pervasive influence on my academic career are obvious and profound. First of all, I became a full believer in bounded rationality under Jim's tutelage. Before I entered the Stanford Graduate School of Business, I had convictions that human beings are limited in terms of ability and moral capacities. The idea of bounded rationality for organizational decision-makers, thus, was highly resonant with my own personal convictions. However, it was not until I started closely working with Jim did I have a better understanding of the theory of bounded

rationality in an organizational context. Through our many discussions, I came to a full understanding of how this important intellectual principle should (or could) be applied and further developed. For that, I am deeply indebted to Jim.

As stated by Jim, the essence of the theory of limited rationality is the theory of attention (or attention allocation). It took me some time to sync in the ideas of attention, information processing, and organizational decision-making in a particular context. This eventually led to the publication of my research on the attention allocation in a rule-making process by the Federal Aviation Agency of the USA (Sullivan, 2010). Jim commented to others that this piece was a direct extension of his work on bounded rationality, and I was happy and highly encouraged to hear that. Of course, after having worked with Jim closely for so long, I had quite some understanding of his work and thinking. But, it was still a great comfort to know his approval. As for that dissertation period itself, I am forever grateful to Jim's guidance, high expectations for rigorous academic work, and his great patience for my academic development and pursuit.

Closely linked to the notion of bounded rationality, organizational learning was another topic that I worked on. Jim's writings on organizational learning were fascinating to me. I had the fortunate opportunity to work with Pamela Haunschild on a project about organizational learning in the airline industry. Usually, Jim was not a big fan of complicated quantitative (statistic) analysis (he preferred simulation experiments), but he was quite intrigued by the ideas and findings in our paper and provided valuable comments to our paper on learning from the complexity that was later published in *Administrative Science Quarterly*.

Another important influence Jim had on me was his stance on performance as a dependent variable for academic research. I joined the Stanford Graduate School of Business with hopes of improving organizational efficiency and effectiveness via my academic research and teaching. My naïve hopes, however, were quickly reshaped, if not totally shattered, by Jim's insights on the studies of organizational performance. Jim's paper with Bob Sutton (March & Sutton, 1997) eloquently declared that the performance emperor is often naked, suggesting that the researchers' pursuits for the determinants of performance typically are vain attempts due to instabilities of performance advantages, an oversimplified model of a complex reality and problems with recalls related to performance. Many points in the paper were either mentioned or emphasized by Jim in my conversations with him. They were Jim's firm beliefs, built on his fundamental belief in bounded rationality. Consistent to the theories of bounded rationality, March and Sutton (1997) stated that 'identifying the true causal structure of organizational performance phenomena on the basis of the incomplete information generated by historical experience is problematic' (p. 699). Given my pre-existing expectations and a certain level of stubbornness, I often strayed away from Jim's expectations. Throughout our discussions, however, whenever I went too far on ideas to explore the performance emperor, I would be gently reminded of the risks of pursuing those ideas by Jim. This influence was significant. And, later in

my career, as a business school researcher and a teacher of strategic management, I experienced exactly what March and Sutton (1997) described (and, often verbally conveyed by Jim in conversations) about how researchers in professional schools encounter the tension between knowledge deliveries on firm performance and serious academic research where performance is much less emphasized. When the field of management recently called for closer collaborations between researchers and the business community, I almost immediately started to think about whether this was a way for business researchers to get out of the pain of ambivalence or whether this was a way to further slip into March and Sutton's description of 'collective and individual hypocrisy' (March & Sutton, 1997). Obviously, we cannot escape this tension as a researcher and a teacher in a business school. Nonetheless, endurance of this 'pain' of ambivalence resulting from such a tension might be necessary – at least, it is good to know that we need to be carefully guarded about the limits in our knowledge when we discuss the determinants of performance.

As for research, Jim provided a clear preference, pointing to an alternative approach to the focus on conventional performance outcomes: to examine the detailed processes in organizational actions, choices and decision-making – an approach emphasizing descriptive realism. This approach does not focus on hypothesis development and testing; rather, it emphasizes a careful investigation and a detailed contextual analysis through which realistic descriptions of particular mechanisms could be revealed. The revealed mechanisms, however, are not limited to any particular context; they are applicable to general organizing activities given certain boundary conditions. As I was more a person of data, with a tendency to look for simplified patterns through statistic tools, Jim's emphasis was another correction to my usual way of thinking. Jim granted his students much freedom in their academic pursuits. Even with different methodological approaches, he never discouraged me to use more advanced statistic tools. The benefits I extracted through the interactions with Jim on this aspect are two-fold. First, I began to look into mechanisms behind the statistic models more deeply. Second, I became more motivated to dive deeper into a particular context where the datasets were generated and to integrate different methodologies (e.g. a combination of big data analysis and in-depth interviews) in order to have a better understanding of certain underlying mechanisms. There seem no perfect ways to do research. Yet, it is an important reminder that identifying mechanisms is important because a realistic world is behind the simplified models. It is also an important reminder that if human beings truly have a certain underlying logic for their choices and actions, different research approaches, with careful designs, are able to reveal converging observable patterns.

Jim's impact on me has been significant – I only highlighted a few important things above. He is an academic father to me. The best word I have that could describe Jim to me is the Chinese word *Enshi* (恩师) – a close and beneficent Teacher to whom I am forever deeply indebted. I was nervous before I met Jim.

I heard some Stanford faculty make comments such as ‘Jim is a genius’; or, ‘He’s the smartest person I’ve ever known’; or, ‘Everyone probably looks stupid to him’, etc. But it was a wonderful surprise for me to find out that such a genius was also a person with such a genuine and kind heart. He certainly tolerated many of my naïve and even stupid comments. He encouraged me often and made me feel ‘smart’ enough by turning my thought ‘lemons’ into more usable thought ‘lemonades’. He was fast to help when I needed it in difficult times. He was not slow to critique either if I strayed too far from his expectations.

Others have commented that it is impossible to model after a genius, implying that it is not a sure thing what Jim’s students could learn from him since *he* was a genius. I honestly agree that I cannot match him. But Jim was not only a genius. He was a master teacher and a person of virtue. For that, I am privileged to have learned under him, and I aspire to be like him: to be a relentless pursuer of scholarly truth, to be a disciplined thinker with a broad and in-depth knowledge pool, to be a teacher with proper kindness, humility, and principles, to be a loving partner in family with enduring love, to be diligent, and, as he was to the furthest depths of his mind and his heart – to be a poet.

Jim, no doubt every one of the Marchian family misses you. I certainly do.

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