On imposters and impact: a comment on the triumph of nonsense

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Commentary for publication by AMLE in response to Dennis Tourish's article "The triumph of nonsense in management studies"

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I have sympathies with many of the arguments made by Denis Tourish in his article and I especially welcome his desire to restore more meaning and purpose to management research, and his call for our writing to have humour, curiosity and passion. But I cannot agree with all of his characterization of our discipline, hence this response. My main point of disagreement is that I feel his account fails to consider sufficiently the diversity around our discipline, and those who populate it.

To be explicit about my own position, like Tourish I have had some success in publishing in the good journals in our field, but I now find myself in mainly a leadership role. As a Dean of a very large Business School, I cannot afford to believe that the entirety of our discipline is morally bankrupt and populated by imposters. I want to have faith that there are Faculty conducting socially useful and important work and that research is making a difference in a number of positive ways. And I do see some of that around me, not just in my own institution but in the networks in which I circulate. This research may not reach the kind of journals that Tourish is focusing upon, but therein lays the problem. When focusing critique on the so-called top journals as Tourish does, we reinforce the importance of those journals, with a number of consequences. We over-emphasize their contribution to our field and privilege a limited number of outputs for our scholarly expertise. In doing so we legitimize the view that publication in this set of journals is the only work of value.

A perhaps unintended consequence of this is that we end up talking to very few people about our work. As management researchers, we need to think about whom we are talking with. In focusing on the alleged development of theory, we are inevitably spending

most of our time in endless circles of discussion with each other. Tourish captures this wonderfully when he discusses the numerous interactions we have with reviewers. As he rightly notes, our obsession becomes that of satisfying the needs of the very few who have offered an opinion on our work. We can understand why this is the case. These are important people to talk with. After all, they are the gatekeepers to the great riches that come with publishing in esteemed journals.

However, if we want to enhance the possibility for management research to achieve what Tourish wants it to, then we really need to consider the diversity of audiences. A potential move away from this obsession with theory has happened in UK Business Schools recently for institutional reasons. The UK Research Excellence Framework (REF), which evaluates and rewards the research of British Universities on a seven-year cycle has become a key criterion of University performance as assessed by both Vice-Chancellors and national league tables. However, the forthcoming REF sees an increase in the percentage of the overall grade dedicated to research impact, measured on both significance and reach. Here our research will be assessed on the extent to which it has effected change. Those who have done the maths - as many UK research leaders have - have posited that one highly rated impact case study has the equivalent influence on a School's REF score of more than a dozen esteemed publications. In the same way that Tourish outlines the increasing prevalence of theory development, impact is now more of a currency in UK Business Schools than ever before. In theory, this means we are talking more to those who use and consume our research, and that our focus has to be on change for the good.

In highlighting the significance of impact, my intention is not to present a rosy alternative to the obsession with theory that concerns Tourish. Indeed, I do have concerns that our assessment of impact will become increasingly more standardised and at some point in

the future, research impact may have the same negative characteristics associated with it that Tourish currently outlines as associated with theory development. Despite that, my point here is that there is considerable diversity in the work we do in our Business Schools. In practice, by far the majority of Business School Faculty in the world's 13,000 Business Schools will never publish in the kind of journals that Tourish is discussing. Recognition of that diversity in our community, and in the audiences that we speak to, is important. In drawing attention to these negative trends in our Business School research community, as Tourish does so eloquently, we must not forget that we are a diverse community who talk with different groups and use alternative publication outlets to those focused upon here.

A second point about diversity relates to career paths and progression. For those of us who have been in academic life for about the same time as Tourish and have managed to achieve publications, we are in an enviable position compared to those junior colleagues starting out in our Business Schools. Any critique needs to consider the differential impact that the obsession with a certain set of journals and theoretical development has. My concern is that it can have a particularly devastating impact on our junior colleagues. In mentoring of junior colleagues, I now find myself cautioning about the need to develop personal resilience, and the ability to cope with rejection, as is common for those aiming high in their publication aspirations. Their work – like that of all of us in Business Schools - is continuously critiqued, be it through journal rejections or the ongoing assessment of our teaching that leads from individual in-class evaluations to the construction of national and international league tables. I am concerned that the pressures and obsessions that Tourish outlines seem to be much worse for our junior colleagues starting out in their academic careers. They are at the harsh end of the performative climate. My worry here is that those in the least secure positions have the least room to both move and protest. Tourish notes that many of our junior colleagues may not have known the academic environment as anything different.

So what can we do? How can we develop and learn to write in a way that creates the colour and life that Tourish advocates that both engages and challenges the reader? Many journals and learned societies – including this one – now run developmental workshops for Faculty on how to publish in these journals. A concern is that these kind of activities may lead to precisely the standardisation that we wish to avoid. Maybe instead, we need to promote alternative writing workshops that rather than focusing upon publication in a certain set of journals, encourage us to bring out the passion, joy and humour in our writing. To learn to love and own our writing again, and in doing so restore the meaning and purpose to management research that Tourish aims to encourage.