

WHAT THE SHADOW KNOWS: EXPLORING THE HIDDEN DIMENSIONS OF THE CONSUMER METAPHOR IN MANAGEMENT EDUCATION

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This article aims to uncover hidden dimensions of the metaphor of consumerism in management education. By exploring the metaphor, the authors elucidate the implicit claims in the assertion that teachers produce business education and students consume that product. The image of commodification structures a discourse that involves conceptions of power, knowledge, and socially useful activity. The discourse emanates from social and educational institutions that shape relations between students and teachers. To understand how the metaphor creates subjective perceptions, the authors propose a linguistic-based framework as an analytical device. They conclude with specific reference to teaching activities and ways in which the so-called shadow of consumerism can be empirically examined.

Keywords: *metaphor; shadow; consumerism; education; students*

In an influential work, Michel Foucault (1980) described his intellectual objective as an excavation of the mechanisms of power in modern societies.

Authors' Note: We would like to thank Dale Fitzgibbons and the anonymous reviewers for the helpful comments on an earlier version of this article. Please address correspondence to Michael A. Gross, Department of Management, Colorado State University, Rockwell Hall No. 218, Fort Collins, CO 80523-1205. phone 970-491-6368; fax 970-491-3522; e-mail: michael.gross@mail.biz.colostate.edu.

JOURNAL OF MANAGEMENT EDUCATION, Vol. 29 No. 1, February 2005 3-16

DOI: 10.1177/1052562903260034

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He argued that there are networks or relations "which permeate, characterize and constitute the social body, and these relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated, nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse" (p. 93). Such discourses are intimately linked with perceptions of truth and legitimacy, for as Foucault insisted, "We are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth" (p. 93). By emphasizing the importance of discourse and the instrumentalities of power, Foucault offers a valuable approach to evolving conceptions of education. To begin with, the dissemination of knowledge is the function of universities. But compelling metaphors enlisted in the creation of new discourses about education challenge the legitimacy of educators and shift the relations of power between institutions, teachers, and students.

Foucault's body of work developed over a period of time and is not aimed at establishing a grand theoretical narrative; rather, he offers insights into techniques of discipline and control over human activity (Burrell, 1997). Among those techniques, Foucault emphasized the construction of our views of the world through social structures and through practices associated with regimes of power. Individuals are subjectively constituted through power relations, ideologies, and institutions that restrict the scope of free agency. As one study of Foucault notes,

Individuals do little more than subjectify themselves to the modern regime of power. Second, in so far as individuals are allowed some measure of creativity, such creativity seems to be restricted by clear limits imposed by a regime of power. (Bevir, 1999, p. 355)

Those insights have practical applications for management, particularly the implementation of organizational strategies of manipulation, control, and domination in the workplace (Deetz, 1998; Townley, 1994). It follows that similar discursive formations can be located in management education.

This article analyzes the ways in which the idea of consumerism applied to the acquisition of knowledge influences the educational process. We begin with a summary of research that focuses on communication as a device for shaping organizational behavior. With that background, we turn to an explanation of the metaphor of student as consumer to describe its effect on long-standing perceptions of the roles of faculty and students. We distinguish between the exercise of genuine power, which features a broad ambit of discretion, and the deployment of mere authority, where action is routine and formalized; that distinction helps to focus the erosion of faculty power associated with educational consumerism. Our argument concludes with a dis-

cussion of how a better appreciation of the metaphor can be used to counteract the pernicious effects of the commodity model.

Metaphor and the Shadow

Over the past few years, organizational scholars have advocated that we think about and study organizations using linguistic-based perspectives to more fully capture the richness of organizational life (Boje, 1995; Pondy & Mitroff, 1979; Putnam, 1999; Putnam, Phillips, & Chapman, 1996). This recasting toward a discourse-based conceptualization of organizations is consistent with the changes occurring in organizations and with the challenges organizations face in the 21st century (Putnam, 1999). By tying the familiar to the unknown, metaphors use imagery to highlight certain features of concrete things by using abstract constructs (Ortony, 1979). Similarly, metaphors can be used to suppress, mask, or hide certain features (Deetz & Mumby, 1985). One of the most influential images in higher education centers on the use of a consumer metaphor for educating students.

A metaphor is a way of seeing a thing as if it were something else, thereby providing a cognitive bridge between two dissimilar domains (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). The metaphor form “A is B” represents the perception, conceptualization, and understanding of an object or event in terms of another. The form “A is B” is not arbitrary because metaphors display directionality; a less clearly delineated object or event, A, is structured by the more clearly delineated experience of the second object or event, B. The conceptual power of metaphor comes from this directionality. That is, the expression derives its power from relating two dissimilar things—one concrete, one abstract—in a novel or nonostensive way (Koch & Deetz, 1981).

The student-as-consumer metaphor highlights particular experiential aspects of the student-university relationship by alluding to the more clearly conceptualized and widely shared understanding of the consumer-organization relationship. Using *as* as the connector, a metaphor represents one way of seeing one thing as something else in a different light. The student-as-consumer metaphor contains variations of the image; in this case, the metaphor of a transactional relationship is based on the exchange of quantifiable economic value. Generally, metaphors help structure beliefs and guide behaviors in organizations, express abstract ideas, convey vivid images that orient our perceptions and conceptualizations, transfer information, legitimate actions, set goals, and structure coherent systems (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Ortony, 1979; Putnam et al., 1996).

Attention and focus require some things to be out of the field of vision, to remain in the shadow (Hillman, 1962). Yet hidden in every metaphor are relationships and outcomes that exist in the unconscious and can be effectively revealed only by analysis of the shadow. The concept of the shadow was first articulated by Jung (1970) and consists of unintegrated attributes that seem negative. Like the shadow, metaphor highlights what is seen and covers what is not seen. The shadow is the unconscious (Zweig & Abrams, 1991; Zweig & Wolf, 1997) and refers to that part of our unconscious that has been repressed for the sake of the ideal (Whitmont, 1991). Thus, the shadow is seen indirectly in the often distasteful traits and actions of others (Zweig & Abrams, 1991; Zweig & Wolf, 1997). Because we mostly encounter the unconscious as projection, we encounter the shadow in our projections and discover it in uncomfortable confrontations with others (Zweig & Abrams, 1991; Zweig & Wolf, 1997).

Exploring the shadow of the consumer-student metaphor allows us to expand our field of vision, thereby counteracting our tendency to focus exclusively on the traditional concept of a university in which professors expound and students acquire skills of cognition, integration, and self-awareness. The unexamined dimensions of the consumption metaphor obscure a densely articulated worldview that exercises a powerful hold on our perceptions. We cannot fully plumb the depth of the metaphor from its fairly innocuous surface appearance—that, for example, acquiring an education is more like buying a can of tuna fish than learning to play chess. The full power of the metaphor comes from synthesizing the seen with the unseen and uncovering both positive and negative aspects. A short description of consumerism's historical roots in this country delineates how social practices evolved over time. To begin with, it should be emphasized that consumption is not a unitary concept in the academic literature, and we follow the stream of research that identifies a major component of consumption as experience. This form of consumption explicates the interpretive frameworks by which people make sense of a consumption object such as a baseball game (Holt, 1995); it is, therefore, fairly analogous to the learning process.

Making Consumers: The Social and Political Dimension

In a recent work, the well-known social historian Gary Cross (2000) traced the rise of consumerism in America over the course of the 20th century. He argues that consumption—that is, the operation of markets—has now displaced other forms of civic interaction. Indeed, capitalism and its apparatus of acquisition has triumphed as a moral, economic, and political

force throughout the industrialized world. More than simple economic manipulation or social emulation, consumerism lies at the core of our civic life. "Modern people, and especially Americans, communicate to others and to themselves through their goods" (Cross, 2000, p. viii). But the transformations from the civic to the individual and the altruistic to the materialistic took nearly a century to be accomplished.

In the 1920s, at the onset of industrial abundance, educators posited culture as an antidote to the increasing commercialism of the times. Even John Dewey, the renowned pragmatist, rejected learning as utilitarianism. Dewey argued that learning should be "for life," and not for an increased economic success. The study of liberal arts, for example, could be justified as an end in itself, not as a means to wealth. As Cross (2000) observes, "Few felt the need to justify English or history courses by insisting that they trained students to be good memo writers or flexible business leaders. The point was to learn to be a lifelong lover of arts and learning" (p. 120). Education, then, served as a way to constrain the consumer culture rather than to promote it. Likewise, family, religious, and political values were raised as bulwarks against the infection of commercialism.

By the end of the 20th century, however, effective circumscriptions on consumerism had vanished. A new era began with the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, and it continues into the present. It is characterized, above all, by the supremacy of individual preference as articulated through market choices. Proponents of conservative values simultaneously embraced the fundamental contradiction of some higher order of principles and individual fulfillment through consumption. Thus, Cross (2000) concludes, "The result was a consumerism that moved even farther away from social cohesion and reality and toward an enveloping personal fantasy" (p. 193). Because markets, in the end, must be deemed the arbiter of all value, any fantasy counts the same as any other and depends for consummation only on the individual's ability to compete economically. In the game of consumption, however, we privilege certain kinds of wealth over others. Entitlements provided by government largesse for conservative politicians skewed the fairness of markets and removed an important disciplinary effect on the undeserving poor. As a result, wealth acquired by merit and by accomplishment carried its own stamp of legitimacy, whereas so-called unearned wealth did not. The political ideology operated to legitimize vast differences in wealth and to promote attacks on state redistributive efforts. Consumerism thus provided a self-referential justification for itself: markets rewarded individuals, and consumption validated the individual.

The alliance of diverse groups around the core notions of individualism, markets, and suppression of a permissive, liberal, and rapacious government

constituted the dominant ideology of the culture wars. Tracing the political consequences of market populism, Thomas Frank (2001) credits consumerism for the annihilation of boundaries between social, political, and economic life. In brief, because all choices can be expressed as commodities, markets are the perfect analogy for human interaction, where worth is determined by transactions. Business education, and specifically management theory, fits perfectly into the grand narrative of conquest. Like other dominant institutions—churches, monarchies, governments—corporations need legitimacy to survive. Frank attributes the popular ascendancy of business leaders in the 1980s and 1990s to the intellectual activity of theorists who expounded a so-called business revolution that supposedly would benefit all citizens. Regardless of the field of any given management theorist, the message remained at bottom the same: "Above all else, one could be sure that [the consultant] would use the language of market populism—of democracy and popular consent as revealed by the mediums of exchange—to describe the operations of the corporation" (Frank, 2001, p. 179).

As a result, consumption, the ideology of individualism, and the radical equality of market preference swept aside any resistance grounded on ideals of social solidarity, aesthetic gratification, or intellectual accomplishment. The production of truth made immanent in the marketplace altered relations of power by undermining the authority of competing sources of knowledge, including universities, and engendered a vast disciplinary technology suited to the psychology of materialism. If learning is a commodity purchased with the price of tuition, then the market for learning establishes its value. Erstwhile students, now identified as consumers, can determine whether the benefits of education exceed its costs and can force institutions to respond accordingly; consequently, the power of markets trumps academic claims about knowledge. We next turn to an elaboration of the specific case of university education and the effects of the commodity metaphor.

The Student as Consumer: Some Behavioral and Conceptual Indicators

The consumer-organization relationship involves the exchange of products or of professional expertise provided by an organization, usually for monetary remuneration by an individual or organization. The service provider who interacts with the consumer represents the organization. A key aspect of this relationship is the concept of customer service, which usually implies fulfilling the customer's needs or wants and making the customer feel good, thereby producing customer satisfaction and creating loyalty. Cus-

tomter service can be characterized as courteous, personalized, or manipulative (Ford & Etienne, 1994).

Courteous service involves behaviors intended to help the service provider form a quick bond with the customer and to create the necessary rapport with the customer. This includes behaviors that include friendliness (McCormack & Kinloch, 1986), immediacy (Ketrow, 1991), social ability (Hester, Koger, & McCauley, 1985), or positive emotion (Rafeali & Sutton, 1990). Personalized service attempts to address the special needs of an individual customer (Ford, 1999) through such behaviors as asking questions to identify customers' needs, offering options and helpful advice, listening attentively, providing a sensitive response to customers' problems, explaining complex information in simple language, and providing informal support as promptly as possible. Manipulative service involves attempts to deceive or control customers (Ford, 1999), including fake smiles, sales pitches, threats and rewards, bureaucratic routines, emotional detachment from customers, a reliance on standardized scripts, and attempts to dominate the service interaction. Customer service providers are likely to use all three of these styles in some combination, although they may rely more heavily on one particular style of behaviors (Ford, 1999).

Within a higher education context, the university provides an education—usually in the form of course content—to the student, who may be explicitly identified as a consumer. Operating under this model, multiple service providers populate the university, from the administration into the classroom and beyond. Our approach here has to do with the particular aspect of commodified knowledge, which signifies teaching as a service encounter between faculty and students. The underpinnings of the model derive from neoclassical economic assumptions, in which markets are deemed to constitute the only objective measure of value. Formally, market transactions are operationalized through contracts, setting forth the rights and responsibilities of the parties. An influential stream of academic theory conceptualizes organizations themselves as nothing more than a “nexus for a complex set of contracts” that specify the “rules of the game within the organization” (Jensen, 1983, p. 326). The contract model gains its power from its supposedly positive as opposed to normative specification of performance standards, reward systems, and decision-making authority. Contractualism has insinuated itself into various academic realms such as economics and accounting, although the theoretical foundations rest on ideological assumptions (Hunt & Hogler, 1990).

In management education, the student-as-consumer metaphor arose in the 1980s, when MBAs were making tremendous gains in salaries, and the costs of an MBA degree began to rise sharply (Van Fleet, 1995). Later, in the

1990s, several factors extended the student-as-consumer metaphor, including the prominence of business-school rankings for attracting top students, faculty perception of a shift in student motivation from acquiring knowledge and skills to a ticket to success, and the use of student evaluations of teaching by administrators to as a basis for assessing faculty performance (Zell, 2001). Each factor contributes to the quantification and commodification of the educational transaction.

A number of trends suggests that the student-as-consumer metaphor is ensconced as a strategic vision for the foreseeable future. Driven by budget crises of varying severity, business schools shift their core competence from one of knowledge creation and dissemination to one of revenue generation. First, the emphases on major development and on alumni-relations programs mean that administrators are more sensitive to negative feedback by students who will eventually be alumni and donors. Second, evidence that market forces are leading management education away from its core exist in the perceived loss of rigor for the MBA program, coupled with the decline in the Ph.D. program and the growth of the executive education programs (Zell, 2001). Finally, administrators feel the pressure to develop an identity or niche in which to excel, the success of which is measured by market acceptance (i.e., positive student and alumni perception). Substituting revenue development for learning confirms the market validation of educational value.

The Power of the Shadow to Influence Relationships

The sustaining linchpin of the student-as-consumer metaphor in management education is that because students pay tuition to attend school, many stakeholders view students to be customers. Therefore, when the student pays the professor's salary and buys the services of the university, the customer can be perceived as always right in response to the service he or she receives. Characterizing education as a form of retailing diminishes the process to a commercial bargain where the contractual outcomes determine the performance of the service provider.

Proponents of the consumer model point out that because students pay for their education, they are making decisions about their major and what classes to take and actively participating in the service encounter. Further, by paying attention to customer desires, faculty are more likely to add value to the education of their students (Chung & McLarney, 2000). It presumably follows that faculty will perform more effectively in the classroom because they will be challenged to integrate learning techniques for a diverse audience. Because students drive the curriculum, it forces faculty, as the service pro-

vider, to be up to date, practical and innovative, and to meet the students' needs to be good managers (Zell, 2001). Thus, faculties have to revamp and update content to be current in their courses and to reflect what is happening in a changing world.

As students become active participants in the service encounters, they are taken into account in the design and the delivery of course materials. Faculty will be more efficient in consideration of the use of the students' class time (e.g., students' learning the key essentials to the course because consumers do not want their time wasted, [Chung & McLarney, 2000]) and more effective in the delivery of course content, such as using multimedia for a more interesting, impactful, and dynamic delivery because sound bites, the Internet, and e-mail have reduced the attention spans of the consumer (Chung & McLarney, 2000). A further outcome of added value to the education of our students is that faculty will better know their students as stakeholders (Treacy & Wiersema, 1993). Overall, faculty members will be more responsive to their students inside and outside the classroom to identify and to acknowledge students' aspirations and to provide them with an education that prepares them to recoup their investment in education.

Although the notion of customer satisfaction might be considered a positive aspect of the student-as-consumer metaphor, it exerts a negative influence when the student becomes the privileged stakeholder. There is an implicit, hidden orientation that places the wishes and desires of the student as the central focus, around which the faculty members and all university activities converge (Chung & McLarney, 2000). Thus, the students are seen to play the central organizational role (Krehbiel, McClure, Pratsini, 1997; Rovenpor, 1995; Tomkovick, Al-Khatib, Baradwaj, & Jones, 1996), as other stakeholder interests are marginalized—including those of society, family, and community.

According to Zell (2001), the implication of customer satisfaction is that students' desires drive curricula content, and because resources follow enrollment levels, departments are rewarded in direct proportion to the number of students who choose to take their courses or programs. To attract, maintain, and increase enrollment, pedagogy can often become entertainment as faculty feels pressure to use techniques to overcome the short attention spans and the desire to be entertained as a method of learning. As with the purchase of a McDonald's product, students demand that professors be responsible for their learning (that is, their satisfaction) as opposed to being responsible for their own learning. The standard mode of learning, featuring the presentation and discussion of content, no longer suffices; in its place are multimedia performances (with the lights out so that they occur in the shadow of the classroom) and are nicely orchestrated packages of consumer

goods. Consequently, students are alienated from a learning process that has them "endure" rather one that they embrace (Franz, 1998). There is evidence from the educational literature that suggests that students most enjoy the teaching method from which they learn the least (Clarke, 1982). A faculty member's role may change from one who disseminates information with the goal of building a student's character and knowledge to that of a used-car salesperson (Bayer, 1996) whose goal is providing near-term gratification of students' wants (Franz, 1998). A good salesperson makes a sale and closes the deal, whereas an effective professor who teaches a difficult skill or body of knowledge inculcates a process that continues past the classroom.

Focusing only on the demands or needs of the student stakeholder ultimately will prove to be corrosive. Privileging students at the expense of other shareholders—parents, future employers, and taxpayers—leads to an imbalance of interests and power. The image of consumerism confers more power on the student-buyer than on any other stakeholder, and students infatuated with the perception of marketplace potency may attempt to exercise their "right" to demand changes in the product. In consequence, there is a power shift in the classroom from disseminating and acquiring knowledge from the service-provider-customer relationship (faculty-student) to the customer's level of satisfaction or complaint with the service provider (student-faculty). The power of complaint may have much to do with grade inflation as students demand and receive what they pay for and what they perceive is their effort with which they receive a grade. The shadow operates to empower the student in ways that alter traditional relations in educational institutions.

Even more deleterious is the probability that with such a strong orientation toward meeting the needs of one group of stakeholders, service providers can no longer adequately fulfill other aspects of the academic mission (Zell, 2001; Chung & McLarney, 2000). When faculty are held to a performance standard based on the criterion of consumer satisfaction, their likely response will be to challenge fundamental precepts of higher education by asking such questions as, What is my school about? What is my pedagogy? and What do we do here? (Chung & McLarney, 2000). The constituent elements of the traditional university give way to commercialized bargains between buyers and sellers of credentials. That is, knowledge is no longer an end in itself but is instrumentally connected to wealth; learning is not a process but a product; and institutional configurations of power and authority are dedicated to Foucauldian "technologies of production" that structure the transformation and the manipulation of a consumption object (Deetz, 1997, p. 152). Driven by outcomes, administrators weaken faculty power by forcing compliance with student-consumer demands. Teaching becomes less discretionary and more routine; in the end, educational bureaucrats institute

regimes of control, under which professors are given authority to perform mere “routine routines” (Barnes, 1986, p. 183) in the classroom in response to the external signs and signals emanating from the consumer marketplace.

Implications and Conclusions

Explicating the shadowy nature of the student-as-consumer metaphor expands our understanding of our roles as educators by providing us with a more complete knowledge of the context in which we work. It has a number of implications for teaching and research. First, on an individual level, deconstructing the consumer model helps us to recognize the projections that filter our perceptions of others and to balance outside influences on our subjective selves (Gemmill, 1986; Gemmill & Costello, 1990; Gemmill & Wilemon, 1994; Zweig & Abrams, 1991; Zweig & Wolf, 1997). Second, we can more fully appreciate our reactions to the shadow of the student-as-consumer metaphor in our dealings with colleagues, students, and constituents and acknowledge that they are not the problem but that an impulse within ourselves makes others appear in a negative or threatening guise (Zweig & Abrams, 1991; Zweig & Wolf, 1997).

Third, through expanded perceptions, we become capable of greater compassion, acceptance, and authentic understanding for others and ourselves (Zweig & Abrams, 1991, Zweig & Wolf, 1997). Individual self-development forms the cornerstone of learning, and our ability to reflexively analyze the discourses of power present in the educational environment enhances our capacity to resist them.

In terms of research, the arguments set out in this article could lead to a more in-depth assessment of management education. We propose several hypothetical propositions that can be empirically tested. To begin with, the student-consumer model lends itself to comparative surveys of attitudes. A scaled response to the statement, a college education is important because it enables me to earn more money, for example, could be elicited from liberal arts and business students. The predicted result is that business students would be more oriented toward a contract, market-driven, transactional relationship with faculty. Recent and highly publicized criticisms of business schools suggest that “there are substantial questions about the relevance of their product and doubts about their effects on both the careers of their graduates and on management practice” (Pfeffer & Fong, 2002, pp. 78-79). The outcomes of management education are determined in part by our expectations, and to the extent that those expectations are fashioned by unexamined discourses about our institutions, we can illuminate the sources of power

influencing our perceptions. Indeed, the use of the term *product* to describe an MBA degree indicates a bias toward the consumer model.

In summary, this article draws on insights from a body of literature emphasizing the discursive analysis of organizations and institutions. We began with propositions about power and knowledge as applied to educational practices. From the perspective of linguistics, we argued that the metaphor of student as consumer has a hidden dimension that influences our perceptions of teaching and of the university itself. Consumerism in education reflects trends that permeate modern society, transforming attitudes, relationships, and institutions. Finally, we attempted to translate theory into the actual practice of teaching and to suggest how our ideas could be incorporated into the assessment of management education. Whether business schools are something more than a retail outlet for credentials is a subject worth further attention.

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