BUSINESS PLASTICITY THROUGH DISORGANIZATION

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BUSINESS PLASTICITY THROUGH DISORGANIZATION

DINUKA B. HERATH
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United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India – Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited
Howard House, Wagon Lane, Bingley BD16 1WA, UK

First edition 2019

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-78756-212-7 (Print)
ISBN: 978-1-78756-211-0 (Online)
ISBN: 978-1-78756-213-4 (Epub)

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ISO 14001

INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

To my family, papa, Kasia Kordula
and
∼ Selina Lundström (1993–2017) ∼

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Foreword

What a Mess!

Do you like mess? Before you answer, take a look at the place where you are right now, as you read this book. You may be at home on the couch, reading on a computer at your office's desk, or perhaps in a coffee shop. Now, there are many different aspects you may observe. Some may give you an idea of how much disorder there is. Let us consider the area next to you. If you see that artifacts and people are in a position that seems systematic, neat, and consistent with what they are there to do, then you may say that the area around you is organized in an orderly fashion. If not, then there is some level of mess. But this is only one aspect of it – *physical* or *material positioning* – and definitely does not cover it. A place can be dirty, and that contributes to giving the feeling that something is not quite in place, it is not done as it should. Untidiness usually goes hand in hand with misplacement but not always. The concept of order includes *tidiness*, the same as disorder or mess may show degrees of untidiness. And what about sound? There might be music or chatting to a level such that you feel obstructed by or embedded in it. That also contributes to creating confusion and a *sense* of disorder. This factor can be called the degree of *noise* in a given environment.

What I described above is very close to my grandmother's concept of disorder or mess. The concept would also include inappropriate tasks performed by individuals at times when they were supposed to something else. This would be playing at the time when one was supposed to take care of homework from school; something that could be called *ideal positioning*. Small variations out of her frame for ideal or physical position, tidiness, and noise would constitute a *logu prontu a partiri.*[1]

Prescriptive Norms and Disorder

Most approaches to disorder and mess have been looking at some objective measurement, in order to qualify it, describe how it affects individuals, and what it can be done to reduce it. This is a very important aspect of the study of

[1]Translated literally from Sardinian, it means that there is so much disorder that the place looks as if everything is ready to fly around or just go by means of its own will. It is typical of Sardinian to use colorful paraphrases to express various concepts. A single word for it would be "carraxiu" (more direct for "confusion" or "mess") but that is not what my grandmother would have said; you had to "feel it" to act on the mess.

disorder/mess because it is an attempt to understand if there is a way to identify it. It is the approach presented by Abrahamson (2002) that is also discussed further in this book. In spite of the good intentions and the positives that such a measurement would bring to management, no actual measure has been successfully and consistently applied – as far as my knowledge is concerned, at least. As Dinuka Herath shows through the pages of this book, it is in fact extremely difficult to produce such a measure. Parallels to entropy are widespread (e.g., Davis, 2011), but an organization is not a gas transforming from one state to another. For example, it is clear that the "state" (better "states") in which human beings find themselves vary continuously and transformations are seldom finite. Also, changing the physical position of objects or artifacts does not modify their molecular state. Yet, one may clearly observe if some supplies are misplaced, if the production site is structured and organized or if it works mostly on improvised and ad hoc procedures. There are systematic ways to produce goods and services, and determine a workable (viable) sensible *mode* to perform tasks. Deviations from those *modes* are somehow indications of disorder or mess. Hence, there is a *norm* to which one refers to. These types of deviations from order are such because benchmarked to a *prescriptive norm* to which the resources had to conform.

This *prescriptive norm* applies to material artifacts of various nature – for example, supplies, computers, screens, and desks – but invariably requires individuals' interpretation. The norm could have been defined many years ago or created as one approaches the material artifact, but it is clear that there ought to be one if a judgment on order/disorder has to be made. Going back to the example at the beginning, the *sense* of disorder derives from an assessment that compares the situation to a norm. And this norm is part of the understanding of the individual(s). My grandmother's prescriptive norm for order was extremely strict so that nothing could fall out of place – and she was the only judge who could say what this "right" place would be. In other words, one of the difficulties in measuring disorder/mess is this human aspect that is inherent to it. Disorder is, ultimately, a perception that individuals feel about work, life, or ideas. Some of these forces operating toward order are well justified, some are not. Problems arise when one has to (a) define an acceptable level of order versus disorder and (b) identify what constitutes a healthy or opportunities-filled disorder state.

In the remaining part of this foreword, I will briefly outline some of the aspects that characterize individual dispositions toward disorder/mess and finish with an encouragement to read past this forward.

The Cognition of Disorder: Prolegomena to a Theory

Before we move forward, I believe I need to discuss the proverbial "elephant in the room." This is the fact that I have been mostly referring to mess and disorder while the book deals with *disorganization*. The two concepts are related and there are many overlaps, in fact, this book addresses definitional and conceptual problems arising from using the various terms. In this foreword, I simply define

disorganization as multiple and systematic occurrences of disorder and mess in a business.[2]

Coupling Mechanisms

As soon as we turn to the individual and try to understand what happens with an assessment of disorder – as with any assessment or evaluation – we cannot do without cognition. Broadly defined, cognition entails the enabling conditions for behavior and action, together with those pertaining to thinking (Wheeler, 2005). As such, especially when it explains the doings of individuals in organizations, it is inherently social. Behavior works as a cognitive mediator: (a) it helps the realization of one's own thinking (Magnani, 2007), (b) it is framed through higher-order theories of mind (i.e. what others think of what I do; Devaine, Hollard, and Daunizeau, 2014), and (c) it may be directed at self/other understanding. For example, by sending an email one has more time to reflect on the actual message because of the writing feedback loops into one's cognition so that it is an externalization that supports and refines the concept. At the same time, the email has one or more recipients and that is part of the way an email is crafted since an intelligent sender should reflect upon the way a message is going to be received. One may say that the cognition of others is part of one's own when the sender postulates about how another may take the message in the email. Finally, the message may have the aim of clarifying a position, specifying a frame/setting, or other explanatory/understanding purposes. There, the various aids for writing one has on the computer (e.g., a dictionary, another email, a document to attach, and a link to refer to) are an essential aid to one's cognition.

When one considers how behavior and action are framed through the perspective above, it becomes apparent that they *are* cognitive. Hence, not only cognition is *extended* to the various resources available, *embedded* in one's individuality, and always *ecologically situated* in a given set of conditions, practices, norms, it is *embodied* because it cannot be without the complex making of the human physicality, and it is also *enacted* or made through action (Menary, 2010; Secchi & Cowley, 2018). In other words, cognition is nurtured by social interactions, shaped by norms and the use of artifacts or, in one expression, it is dependent on (and it affects) the exploitation of external resources (Secchi & Bardone, 2009).

From this *distributed* cognitive perspective (Cowley & Vallee-Tourangeau, 2017; Hutchins, 1995), it is apparent that the social sphere affects one's way to conceptualize, interpret, and act on disorder. To make this conceptualization easier to operationalize, Clark and Chalmers (1998) propose the idea that cognitive mechanisms happen by series of *couplings* with external resources – including

[2]This is a rather simplistic definition that does not, de facto, address the problem. One may ask what is "mess" then, or what is "disorder," what do I mean with "systematic" and "occurrence." This Foreword is not the place to address all these aspects and I refer to the book and the pages that follows for a definition of all these terms.

social resources and others in general (Secchi, 2011). In a recent article (Jensen, Secchi, & Jensen, 2018),[3] two colleagues and I propose a classification of these mechanisms, in *socio-material* and *conceptual* as they specifically refer to the interplay between social channels and cognition. While the former (socio-material) is meant to describe exploitation of artifacts, such as using a computer or a tool, the latter describes couplings with ideas and other abstract elements that make interactions actually work. Normative aspects of organizational life would fall into conceptual couplings, as one adapts to a given working environment by knowing, interpreting, and applying organizational norms, among many other doings. These are essential to structure one's interaction in a given environment. Take the case of someone joining a team in the finance department of a large firm. There are set procedures and routines that are meant to ease the workflow and pressure for individuals. Knowing them and understanding what they mean in practice allows the newcomer to "fit in." Of course, these procedures and routines are set to create some level of order in the workplace. It is crucial that they are explained and shown by a colleague – a mentor, perhaps – in an attempt to expedite the newcomer's "fitting in" process. Flaws in the process make it such that misinterpretation or wrongdoings may create some level of confusion and disorder, hence making these procedures and routines work less efficiently and somehow differently. For the newcomer, two cognitive couplings have to happen at the same time, one is the extent to which he/she could take in the suggestions and information coming from the mentor (also called "docility"; Secchi, 2011; Secchi & Bardone, 2009; Simon, 1993) – a material social coupling mechanism. Another is the compatibility between the organizational norm (i.e. the procedures and routines in the(an) example) and the individual readiness and willingness to adopt them – a conceptual coupling mechanism. A newcomer with experience from a long career in another firm may understand the procedure and decide to change it and make it better. That creates uncertainty and, eventually, *disorder*. Importantly, it won't necessarily create a lack of effectiveness and it may even improve efficiency in the workplace, but it would be misaligned with previous work practices. From this example it is apparent that various possible combinations of these two couplings may provide an indication of the perceptions of disorder.

Three Domains

Perception is a wide domain in cognitive psychology, and these pages are not the place to get into its theory. At the same time, one could discuss the dynamics of disorder perceptions as they relate to the distributed cognitive mechanisms outlined in the previous pages. Each individual would have a mix of components that, together, determine their dealings with disorder. Some are grounded in individual characteristics such as history/experience, skills, competencies, and other

[3]An earlier version of this paper was presented at the EGOS conference in 2015. The current version is very different from that earlier one and, as of today, it is still unpublished and in search for a home.

more general attitudes toward the self and the others. Others depend on the way individuals use several combinations of their individual traits and characteristics to engage with others in a way that creates understanding, meaning sense, and various domains of interconnections. Finally, other aspects on one's reasoning depend on the overall structural elements, for example, formal and informal rules, physical constraints, and other super-structural aspects – that provide a cultural framework in which to operate. The first is the *micro*-domain while the last is the *macro*; the second is a *meso*-domain and that is where most of the relevant organizational cognition happens (see Secchi & Cowley, 2018, 2016).

The two coupling mechanisms described above can only be understood (and actually make sense) when correlated with components of these three domains. In fact, we can draw some connections from the example of email writing. The process of writing at a computer may be thought of as falling into the *micro*-domain. The higher-level thoughts on how an email could be taken or on the elaboration of the message are more happenings at the *meso*-domain. The *macro*-domain provides with institutional norms that shape the typical interaction dynamics in an organization. These are only examples and we invite the reader to refer to other work to explore these domains further (Secchi, 2011; Secchi & Cowley, 2018, 2016).

How It Happens

A perception of disorder in organizations may emerge as a result of dissonance or unfitting occurrence that can be framed at the interception of two or more of these domains. What mentioned at the beginning of this Foreword – the influence of a *prescriptive norm* – is equivalent to the impact that the *macro* has on both *meso*- and *micro*-domains of interaction. Disorder is spotted when, for example, the place of an artifact (e.g., a tool) is different from the prescribed place, or its use is different from that instructed by the organization. In a restaurant, for example, when adding salt on the chips, one is supposed to put it back into its original spot. There is a procedure to follow. And it does not matter if it is more effective to place it elsewhere, failing to place it where it was originally may result in the perception of some degree of disorder.

A similar process could be mapped when one considers conceptual couplings. A particular index (e.g., ROS – return on sales) may be used only in connection to another (e.g., ROI – return on investment), but one may start breaking the procedure and infer different information by using it in connection to various others (e.g., liquidity indexes). The fact of breaking the "rule" would result in better understanding of a company's finances, but it may also leave the persons involved with a feeling of being unaccepted or of having broken free from group identity. The (macro) *norm* is somehow shaping the perception of the new approach, considered out of the usual order.

At the *micro*- and the *meso*-domain interception, disorder may be perceived as individual experience clashes with the way others conduct business in the organization. By reverting the example above, one may say that most newcomers have the impression that business is conducted somehow in a disorderly manner during the first days of their job, at least. This impression increases, perhaps, with the

newcomer's increasing experience and longer work history. Some ways of interaction may result disordered and slightly disorganized or they may be not, as people in different organizations are known for conducting business in a fairly different variety of ways. This works for both uses of material artifacts and for discussing and making sense of concepts. It is clear that the way individuals interact – the way, for example, an employee may report to his/her boss (or not) – is also shaped by cultural norms as they have developed in the organization as a whole (i.e. the *macro*-domain).

Table 1 provides some examples of how disorder perceptions may be interpreted by using the framework outlined here. The intersections between domains identify possible ways in which disorder can be perceived. The descriptions in the cells up the diagonal consider socio-material couplings, while those in the lower part deal with conceptual couplings. This is, of course, a proposal for a conceptualization of this cognitive approach to disorder, and it is meant as a foundational effort toward a theory that tackles with these issues. When considering both interceptions (upper and lower diagonals), the two most likely to determine disorganization perceptions are those involving the *meso*-domains. This is because this is the domain where social interaction happens and where most of the meaning is actually formed in organizations.

Adapting to Disorder

Studying ways in which disorder and disorganization can be identified are certainly necessary to understand the cognitive mechanisms in place. Of course, these pages are by no means the final words on this aspect. On the contrary, they are just a sketch of what a (hopefully) useful theory for the understanding and mapping of the cognition of disorder could be. But, how would one overcome the discomfort that derives from disorder? Or, better, when does disorder come not to cause discomfort?

It is by taking from the pages that follow in this book that one is able to indicate how cognitive processes could find disorder and disorganization an effective tool. Some of these elements are linked to the *functional*, others are related to the *structural*. A functional determination of disorder/mess derives from the impression (or a factual confirmation) that efficient work cannot be conducted. In this respect, this is a negative connotation, because it frames work as a decrease of input costs/resources when the output remains the same or increases (i.e. efficiency). Hence, the assessment is due to the instrumentality of the conditions and their use toward a goal. This implies that a more positive connotation of disorder is accompanied by an instrumental use of that mess. If the use of that particular tool or misplacement of another is somehow effective in completing a task or solving a problem, for example, then the perception of disorder may be associated with a sense of positivity. If repeated, this may constitute a cognitive explanation of the reason why the functional element of disorganization (as discussed in this book) may support organizational work.

The second element relates to the configuration of resources in a given workspace. In other words, resources (of any kind, including humans) map on some

Table 1: When One Perceives Disorder (Examples).

Domain of Interactions	Micro	Meso	Macro
Micro	*Exploiting tools and artifacts or engaging with an idea*	The use (or abuse) of oregano on a classic pizza may be subject to reprimand by the head pizza-maker, creating a feeling of disorder on both sides	Organizational culture may be such that nobody is authorized to append paper out of the office door. By doing so, one contravenes to the shared norm
Meso	One's understanding of a routine may not be in line with what others in the team understand that routine is there for. Both sides will perceive out-of-order (mis)understanding	*Interacting with colleagues to foster identification, definition, understanding, diagnosing of tasks, problems, and organizational processes*	A research unit decides that they should have a logo to communicate with the outside world. The organization has a policy of no-logo outside of their own. The sense of frustration (on the unit's hand) and confusion (on the corporate hand) bring in disorder
Macro	One may identify one's own team as hierarchy-free. The organization may still require to follow formal lines when submitting a report. One may then be disoriented by the mismatch between the understanding of work and organizational bureaucracy	One is not supposed to disagree directly with others. When that happens, some may have a feeling of confrontation and hostility that is not conducive to neat (regular) communication	*The institutional constraints incumbent on one's action (e.g., organizational culture, procedures, routines, and norms)*

Note. Descriptions in the interception of the upper diagonal consider examples with perceptions of disorder in the case of socio-material couplings while those in the lower diagonal part consider conceptual cognitive couplings and perceptions of disorder.

model, either predefined or apparent as soon as one approaches the workspace. This *structural* element is also anchored to the existing configuration of resources, but it clearly assumes that there are normative prescriptive values in place. Similarly, with the functional, the *structural* element can also relate to positive assessments of disorder, if it allows reaching better or improved performance.

Both elements could be considered separately or in combination and I am proposing some sort of reinforcement process, such that – either functionally or structurally – cognitive mechanisms leading to disorder/disorganization are deemed effective and repeated. Nothing can be simply repeated when we consider the intersections in Table 1, but cognitive patterns could be isolated.

Why Read This Book?

So who likes mess? Some people do. Actually, most people do. Perfect order is not for human beings, nor is it for successful businesses. This book takes the discussion in exactly this direction. Not only it is impossible to reach any god-like level of perfection, but it is also unknown (and unknowable), and especially not apt to the regular functioning of individuals in social systems. The cognitive patterns indicated above are complex, dynamic, adaptive, hence they change constantly. Not once there could be the same situation leading to the same cognitive process. This is an inherent disorder that, at a more systemic level, one may call disorganization.

This book is important for at least two reasons. One is that the author has the bravery to ask an inconvenient question. A question that has been in front of all of us since the beginning of time. What is a workable level of disorganization? It is brave because, on the one hand, it assumes that there is disorganization, on the other, it assumes that it does not necessarily spill negative implications for the organization.

The history of management and organization research is constellated by the denial of this statement. Actually, their foundation is a testament to order. With new waves of technological innovation (e.g., big data, industry 4.0), these foundational management principles revive and lead to a new spree for order. They are, of course, illusions; disorganization is everywhere. This is not to say that we should stop organizing, or attempting at becoming more efficient. But to keep approaching managerial problems as if all disorganization is eminently "bad" is a mistake. This book shows how aspects of disorganization can be acknowledged, defined, diagnosed, and put to work. And this foreword advances some propositions to explain what is the cognitive backbone of disorganization.

Another very important reason for reading this book is that it does not *just* consider disorganization. It does so by employing a technical methodological arsenal that is adequate to the problems at hand. It is only by acknowledging that social systems are always complex, adaptive, and dynamic (Edmonds & Meyer, 2017; Secchi & Neumann, 2016) that one is able to observe the role of disorganization. Therefore, the choice of agent-based computational simulation modeling (Fioretti, 2013; Secchi, 2015) as one of the techniques among the most appropriate (if not the most appropriate) to analyze disorganization. This is a

very advanced computational technique that allows taking into consideration the emergent properties of a system. And these are among those that can only be accounted for if one includes some degree of disorganization in the system – as brilliantly shown in the book.

Of course, there is much to do in the study of disorganization, but this book constitutes one among the very few steps in a fruitful direction. If we agree with the statement that social systems are complex, we must not avoid disorganization and include it as foundation for a renewed field of management and organizational research.

Acknowledgments

On a more personal note, this book is a source of great inspiration, and I wish to thank the author, Dinuka B. Herath, for the invitation to write a Foreword. Not a long time ago, I supervised Dinuka's Ph.D. with the invaluable help of Dr Fabian Homberg. He is now a well-published colleague who develops and expands our common research interests by adding critical value. It is an immense pleasure for me to have written this Foreword, I hope it lives only up to the level of the book. I also must extend a big thank you to my mother and father, who were so kind to remind me of the Sardinian expressions used early on in this Foreword. Finally, I completed these pages as I was on vacation with my beautiful wife. She is usually very patient with me and this time she made sure I could write even if we looked very much forward to this holiday together. Thank you, my *gioia*, I am done now.

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Preface

This book represents the culmination of five years of research. My first encounter with the phenomenon of disorganization was rather confusing; especially since up to that point, disorganization always seemed to be a something that was unwanted and perhaps even despised by many. Moreover, disorganization created the mental image of political unrest or a really cluttered room in my mind. Therefore, I was pleasantly surprised when I started reading Eric Abrahamson's (2002) paper on "Disorganization theory and disorganization behaviour." Since this fateful encounter, I have been fascinated with its promise as well as its applicability to how we manage our organizations. The appeal of this topic to me is twofold. First, given disorganization as a research endeavor is still in its infancy, the first appeal for me is being able to be one of the few people exploring this topic in-depth and having the ability to forge the path is exploring disorganization as we go along. This book being one of the first of its kind fully dedicated to exploring disorganization within businesses is a case in point. The second appeal has to do with my inclination for novelty in my work and research. Even though, I have varying research interests, disorganization research has always been at the top of my list due to its unique standing in management thinking. Disorganization as discussed in this book stands at odds with the conventional ways in which we approach management. Even among the new converts who are sympathetic toward the concepts of disorganization, given its lack of maturity as a field, many scholars find it rather problematic assimilating all the information required to move this field forward. Most of the work in regard to disorganization is sporadic and few and far between. Therefore, my fundamental motivation for writing this book was to provide the necessary foundational text that a scholar or perhaps a practitioner who wants to explore disorganization can use as a starting point.

In writing this book, I was able to gather a lot of information spanning over six decades which looked at concepts relating to disorganization. It was a challenging task to synthesize all these pieces of knowledge into one coherent narrative. It was also very interesting to see how concepts of disorganization sit in relation to similar concepts such as flexibility, agility, malleability, dexterity, and adaptability. Having spent a lot of time dealing with these etymological issues, I could see why our notions of disorganization were developed in sporadic patches. Therefore, one of my aims was to make sure that these issues are resolved in this book. In doing so, my intention was to provide a precise set of definitions and concepts which clearly carve out a space for disorganization while also emphasizing why the concepts of disorganization deserves its own seat at the intellectual table.

Ultimately, I hope that you will learn to appreciate the concepts disorganization presented in this book as much as I have enjoyed developing and writing them. Regardless, of your starting point in terms of your previous exposure to the concepts of disorganization, I believe there is something valuable in this book for everyone who is interested in management. Therefore, I have written this book in a manner which is designed to communicate to both practitioners and researchers simultaneously. Achieving this was not an easy task. However, in the world we live in today, it is imperative that academics and practitioners have a healthy and consistent dialog on the things that matter to us. After all, this is the only way in which we can face the challenges that await us in the twenty-first century.

$\sim$ Thank You $\sim$

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge and show my appreciation to Dr Davide Secchi and Dr Fabian Homberg who have been the driving force behind my research for the past five years. Their constant guidance, wisdom, and assistance have been immense throughout the development of this book. I would also like to thank Gayanga B. Herath, Mahinda B. Herath, and Kumudini Yapa for their care, guidance, and companionship, without which this book or the research preceding it would not have been possible. In addition, I would like thank my loving grandparents along with my uncle Ananda, aunt Amitha, and Anuka B. Herath who have always shown me love and support. I would also like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to Miss Katarzyna Kordula who has also been an exceptional source of support throughout the development of this book. I would also like to show my appreciation to the University of Huddersfield and more specifically, the Business School for being an excellent support system. In addition, I am appreciative of the backing the Organizational Behaviour Special Interest Group at the European Academy of Management has given me by funding some of the research that formed the basis of this book. Finally, I would like to thank all the authors that I have cited in this manuscript for their excellent work which helped me breathe life into the arguments and make the discussion more colorful.

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Chapter 1

Sorting the "Mess" from the Rest

Thank you very much for taking the time to read this book. The author would use this first chapter in order to provide a backdrop to our discussion and the reason "why" this book was envisaged and the motivations behind the topic. In this chapter, we will first look at how we can have a conversation about the topic without getting bogged down in terminology. Then we will look at how to logically break down the problem and how the flow of this book is developed. Finally, the author provides a breakdown of the structure of this book in order to manage your expectations as to what you could expect in the subsequent chapters. The author would recommends following a chronological order of the book as your preferred method of reading, even though each chapter can also be read as a standalone piece if needed. So let's get down to business and get the "why" questions out of the way first.

Why Now?

Let's start with a simple argument

Premise 1: The primary role of a good management scholar is to understand how management works by exploring the full range of possibilities available to understanding management in businesses.
Premise 2: Disorganization is one such possibility.
Conclusion: Therefore, disorganization ought to be explored.

In the above argument, Premise 1 is uncontroversial. Over the past century, support for Premise 1 has been abundant (Abrahamson & Eisenman, 2001; Evans, 1999; Wren & Bedeian, 1994). It is, in fact, impossible to mount a case as to why the primary role of management scholars is not to understand management by exploring all the possibilities available. Therefore, Premise 1 is uncontroversial both in principle and in practice. In fact, with the rapid increase in technology and globalization, the number of possibilities management scholars needs to consider has increased rapidly (Adams, 2017; Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000; Hrynyshyn,

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doi:10.1108/978-1-78756-211-020191001

2002). The increase of topics of interest in management science shows that management scholars are acknowledging these changes and exploring the full range of possibilities in order to better their understanding of how management in business works (Sayer, 2010). While Premise 1 states what the role of the management scholar is, how well this role is fulfilled is a separate question as some of these possibilities available for understanding management are more straightforward than others. This means that while management scholars by definition explore the full range of possibilities available, the attention each possibility is given is varied based on a multitude of reasons (trends, personal interest, funding, commercial impact, ease of measurement, academic pressures, and conforming to the status quo). This brings us to Premise 2. Premise 2 is not as uncontroversial as Premise 1, this is, however, not due to any logical or conceptual issue, but instead the disproportionate attention the study of disorganization has received. Consequently, if one were to disagree with the above syllogism, the best place of attack would be Premise 2. Therefore, simply put, the purpose of this book is to build the case for Premise 2 and to defend the premise that disorganization is indeed a possibility management scholars need to consider in understanding management. This will be done through providing a cumulative case as to why disorganization is a viable option in developing our understanding of management and why as management scholars and practitioners we need to take disorganization seriously in our thinking especially in the twenty-first century.

In 2002, an interesting article (Abrahamson, 2002) was published in the journal *Research in Organizational Behavior* titled "Disorganization theory and disorganization behavior: Towards an etiology of messes." This was the first attempt to date that endeavored develop a robust theory of a phenomenon which the authors in the paper argued as ever-present and inescapable. This was the phenomenon of "disorganization." At first glance, most people including myself tend to think of a pile of rubbish, or a messy desk, or an inefficient perhaps even undesirable situation (i.e., a crime-ridden town) when confronted with this word. What was more interesting was that in this particular paper the focus was on disorganization at the workplace. Upon being confronted with this rather undesirable sounding phenomenon which some prominent academics have dedicated their time and effort on, I was intrigued as to what they were trying to tell. This is when I was pleasantly surprised. The surprise was that this was the first academic paper of its kind which tried to explore messiness in organizations and actively build a case for it. However, it did a lot more than just exploring the phenomenon. In fact, the central argument of the paper was why messiness was a "good thing" rather than something for us to fear or move away from. Of course, this was not a paper championing anarchism or lawlessness. Instead, it was on taking a calculated decision within organizations to allow certain forms of disorder and perhaps even actively encourage such phenomena to reap potential benefits.

When you first encounter the word "disorganization," if you think of a messy desk or a cluttered set of documents you are not completely wrong, but you are only half-right. What this paper was arguing for was not really about the desk being messy, but how you react to the messiness, where they argued our

aversion to such messiness was what needed to be questioned (especially in the context of organizations). At this point, you might think this is an interesting topic indeed, but why should we really care to spend time thinking about it? The answer to this question has been promoted on two fronts. The first approach looks at disorganization as an antidote to modern business and project failures and argues for disorganization to be embraced as a fundamental solution to these problems (Abrahamson & Freedman, 2013). The second approach looks at how disorganization originates within businesses and argues that disorganization as a phenomenon is inevitable in organizations. Therefore, we ought to leverage this phenomenon to our benefit. While both these lines of reasoning provide a rationale for exploring disorganization on its own, combining these two thrusts provide a cumulative case as to why disorganization should be systematically studied. Now, let's explore these reasons in more detail.

Disorganization as an Antidote to the Growing Pains of the Status Quo

In the past 50 years, the number of businesses across the globe has grown immensely (Fsb.org.uk, 2018; Statista, 2018). This is in line with our population growth (Kremer, 1993), technological advancements, and the push toward globalization (Galor & Weil, 2000). In keeping with this growth, the employee base that feeds these growing needs have also grown at a comparable rate. The number of business graduates produced per year and the number of active business schools have also steadily increased (Herath, 2017; Jackson, 2013). While we have become a lot more sophisticated in how we as humans organize ourselves into complex's social structures in the pursuit of common goals, the number of us who fail at this very exercise has also steadily increased (Reeves, Levin, & Ueda, 2016). Wagner (2013) estimates 8 out of 10 businesses/projects that are started today, will either be over budget, require more time than initially envisaged, or just outright fail (i.e., fail to achieve the intended aims and objectives). For every 100 business that is started today, over 50 of them fail (in some form) within the first year's operation ("Top 6 Reasons New Businesses Fail", 2018). It is indeed very clear and even somewhat expected that when the number of businesses grows, the number of businesses that fail also grow. However, it is not that clear why we have not been able to steadily reduce the rate of business and project failures. In fact, most studies indicate the business and project failure rates are increasing (Office for National Statistics, 2016). The extant literature exploring the growth in business failures points largely to a given organization's incapability to rapidly adapt to dynamic internal and external drivers that exert pressure on the business (Everett & Watson, 1998; Lukason, & Hoffman, 2015; Mueller & Shepherd, 2016; Walsh & Cunningham, 2016). Some recent examples of this failure to adapt can be seen in the case of the video rental service Blockbuster (Cook, 2014). While their initial business model was highly successful, they failed to appreciate the changes in the marketplace (especially its technological environment). With the rapid development of technology mainly through the increase in download speeds around the world, it was becoming much cheaper to stream a

film online than to rent it at a store. By the time Blockbuster came to realize the potential of the technology, its competitors had already fully embraced it effectively out-competing Blockbuster. As of 2018, blockbuster is a failed organization ("Blockbuster LLC Chapter 11 Petition," 2010) with a glorious past as well as a cautionary tale. Closer scrutiny of this sharp decline of Blockbuster and others like it provides more evidence to the notion that most modern businesses fail due to its incapability to adapt. While this lack of adaptability effectively leads to failure, what encourages such inflexibility is what we are interested here. However, the problems do not stop there. Their effects are far more catastrophic than just the financial losses a given organization might face. Along with the growing rates of business failure, a parallel concern has also come to light which as some would argue is perhaps more concerning than the business failures themselves. This is the human cost of business (Abrahamson & Baumard, 2008). With the rapid increase of business growth and failure, we have also seen a marked increase in the toll it takes in the people who are in the midst of this dynamic interplay. Countries like Japan who were (and in many cases still are) beacons of efficiency, growth, and commerce are cases in point (Amagasa, Nakayama, & Takahashi, 2005; Shimazu & Shaufeli, 2009). When looking at these trends the question then is, what are the root causes for these failures which are taking a considerable toll on businesses while leaving a trail of destruction in terms of the negative effects it has on the actors involved.

The question when looking at this growth versus failure dynamic I have presented is then to first look at the causes of this dichotomy and to then determine if we can improve the situation. At this point, one might simply say that when growing we should expect growing pains. While this seems to be a much generalized sentiment (broad brush stroke one might add), it is nevertheless a reasonable response. I for one (or anyone tackling these issues) am not arguing that there should be no failure associated with business growth. Such pronouncements are grossly impractical. Instead, the call proponents of disorganization are making is simply that "we could do better" and perhaps we ought to do better. In fact, the central argument is that most of these failures are self-inflicted due to overreliance on "organizing" things. In the form of an analogy, think of a person with a headache. It is indeed reasonable to expect "headaches" when one has a "head" but that does not stop anyone from using a painkiller to alleviate the said headache even if one is expected to encounter headaches as an inevitable consequence of having a head. Similarly, we certainly need to accommodate growth pains and teething problems as businesses grow. Nevertheless, we ought to continually calibrate and optimize our remedies for such issues.

Now that I have introduced the need to do better in terms of addressing this problem of increasing business failure, the next step is to explore the problem a bit more in detail. First, it should be noted that problems of the scale discussed here are rarely univariate problems; which means that the causes for such issues are seldom due to one variable. Instead, it is a multivariate problem with a number of competing variables which all contribute to the problem at varying degrees. This is where the phenomenon of disorganization comes into play. As Abrahamson (2002) and Abrahamson & Freedman (2013) argue, the root cause for the

problems we encounter today in terms of business failure is not our inability to efficiently organize or manage businesses; it is, in fact, our overreliance on order (organizing) and the inability to shift this fundamental presupposition in our thinking. Simply put this is our collective veneration of order and our disdain for disorder. Abrahamson (2002) argues that this predisposition to organizing is so potent that, it is not even considered a possible variable contributing to modern business failures. It is already assumed and taken as a given that "order is good for business." This predisposition prompts businesses into thinking that "order" increases "efficiency" (Fig. 1). Now at first glance, this predisposition seems rather benign, perhaps even accurate. However, under closer scrutiny, the fallacy in such thinking can be exposed. The issue with thinking order as a necessary condition for efficiency is not a new practice. Instead, its roots go all the way back to the earliest human civilizations. It is plain to see why such a reverence toward order has taken root in our thinking. It is because thinking order helps us achieve efficiency has indeed done just that over millennia. How we ordered materials, helped us construct monuments, build bridges and cities. Learning how to order humans helped us develop societies and pursue common goals in a structured manner. Therefore, thinking order is a necessary condition for progress is well warranted (Shenhav, 2002). This is the reason why that any discussion against ordering things tend to receive much skepticism and perhaps even cynicism. However, starting from the 1950s, when our systematic study of organizations was growing rapidly, the first glimpses of the perils of thinking order as a necessary condition were slowly starting to get exposed. Studies conducted in the 1960s by Merton (1968) and others (Crozier, 1969) along with later studies by Warglien and Masuch (1996) who explored businesses in varying stages of their lifecycle found that ordering things did indeed increase efficiency. However, this increase was not linear as we thought (Fig. 1). Instead, the effect of order had diminishing returns and that after a threshold anymore increase in order actually decreased the efficiency of the organization (Fig. 2). It was also determined that once this decrease in efficiency occurs due to order, reversing the detrimental effects were not as easy as one might think.

How could this be? What these studies found was that when businesses wanted to achieve efficiency they increased order. This drive to increase order was driven by the predisposition that order was seen as the method in which efficiency could be increased. What they encountered when exploring this process of increasing order was a vicious cycle.

As depicted in Fig. 2, having the need to increase the efficiency of their operation, the management of the business starts increasing order. This then leads to the workers within the organization having to operate in a much more ordered environment. If this process happened only once, there seems to be no significant problem. However, none of the organizations only organized once. Instead, organizing was an iterative process. These iterations were driven by the need to continually increase efficiency. Therefore, whenever the management of the organization felt like more efficiency was needed, the go-to approach was to increase order (keeping in line with the predisposition that "order leads to efficiency"). When this process becomes iterative as discussed, the problems with order start to come

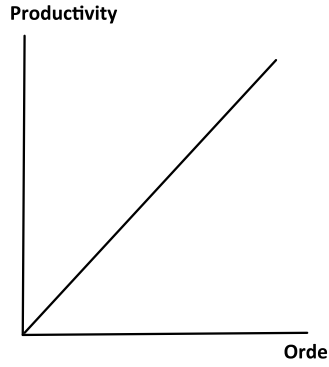

Fig. 1: Expectation.

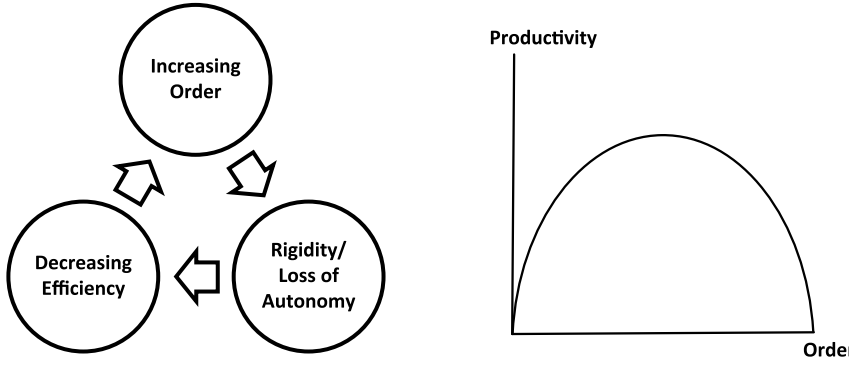

Fig. 2: Reality Uncovered through Empirical Evidence.

to light as depicted in Fig. 2. As the order keeps increasing, the workers become more and more restricted. This then leads to a limitation of their operating room (elbow room as originally coined). These limitations could be imposed structurally, functionally in terms or rules of interaction or even cognitively. This then increases the dissatisfaction among the workers. This dissatisfaction then leads to loss of worker efficiency as opposed to increasing it. When the management sees this decrease in efficiency, they once again start further organizing. Given that they are predisposed to believe that order always increases efficiency, they are effectively oblivious to the real problem. Their thinking seems to be that the lack of efficiency shown by the workers is due to not enough order instead of seeing the issues as being caused by the already high levels of order. Thus, the management of the organization further increases the order within the organization which only exacerbates the inefficiencies of the workers. This cycle continues until the management runs out of funds (willpower in some cases) or until the workers leave the organization (Warglien & Masuch, 1996). At this point, the project or business in question is effectively stagnant and perhaps even failed. This is the vicious cycle or order.

This cycle seems obvious in hindsight (Streatfield, 2001). However, seeing this issue before it manifests its detrimental effects is anything but obvious mainly due to our predisposition to order I have been discussing in this section. This is much like the initial aversion one might get when being confronted by the term "disorganization" for the first time. This means, that our predisposition toward order is so deeply rooted, while careful extrapolation of the problem as I am attempting here might show us the perils of order, at first glance, it is very hard to see how ordering things could go wrong in principle. This is why discussing the topic of disorganization is quite challenging at first, however, if we are able to get through the strong lure to see order as necessarily positive, we might actually be able to better organize ourselves to suit the trying times we currently find ourselves in.

Embracing the Inevitability of Disorganization

In the previous section, we looked at the first driver for studying disorganization. This is the drive to find solutions to current business and project failures by questioning some of the most firmly held fundamental belief systems which pervade modern management thinking. The second drive for the study of disorganization stems from a different vantage point. In fact, if you do not buy into the first driver presented in this book, this second driver alone could carry the whole argument. It is, of course, more potent when both arguments are combined to provide a cumulative case. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the second driver does not depend on the first driver. You could disagree with the fact that questioning our fundamental persuasions toward order might not be the best route to fixing problems with modern businesses, yet agree with the second driver completely.

As opposed to the first driver discussed which looks at disorganization as a possible antidote to modern woes, the second reason for disorganization to be studied comes from a very interesting realization. This is the realization that disorganization in its most basic form can be seen in every facet of an organization. The most basic form of disorganization here refers to the unpredictable (stochastic) accumulation of entities over time (Abrahamson, 2002). Here entities could be either physical (i.e., papers on a desk, files in your computer) or nonphysical (i.e., your relationships at work, the power structures within the organizations, and problems faced when achieving goals). The notion here is that over time, the number of these entities accumulates in any task at a micro-, meso-, or macrolevels of an organization. This accumulation is unpredictable, and no matter how well a system is organized some form of such accrual is bound to happen. This falls in line with the data which shows that for every 10 projects that are started, eight run into severe difficulties in their lifetime (Wagner, 2013). If analyzed more closely, even the ones that finish within budget or on time also encounter such accumulation. It is that they have been able to deal with such accumulation in an effective enough manner to achieve the set goal with the set boundaries. This accumulation can be illustrated through a simple graphic.

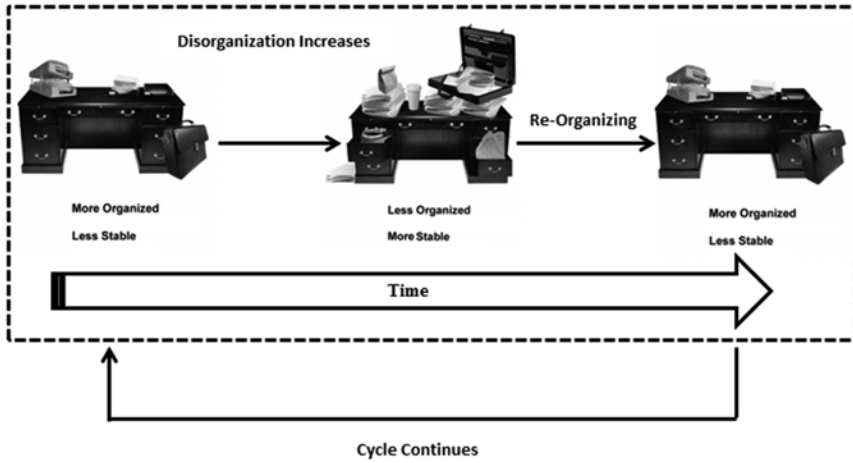

Fig. 3: Lifecycle of Disorganization.

As shown in Fig. 3,[1] the desk starts off in an organized state (perhaps organized by the owner of the desk). However, over time things (entities) pile up on the desk. This accumulation is not planned or predictable (midpoint in Fig. 3). The starting point (organized desk) is an unstable state. The reason being that there are more ways than its current form can be disturbed than for it to be further organized. Any little deviation from its current form (moving a piece of paper) makes it loose its original state. Most importantly, this deviation can easily be noticed. In contrast, when the desk is messy, any change to one entity is less noticeable. Furthermore, the only thing that would happen when the desk is already disorganized (midpoint) is that the desk is more likely to get even messier. In fact, it is highly improbable that the desk will be spontaneously reordered to its original form. In simpler words, the desk can get disorganized without any or minimal intervention (a gust of wind blowing a paper away, dust accumulating, etc.) while for it to be organized considerable and deliberate intervention is needed. Therefore, disorganization is a more stable state than the initial organized state of the desk. If one were to not intervene in this accumulation process, it will continue indefinitely. Now, one question that might pop up here is that, does this entity count always accumulate? Can some entities be eliminated or removed? The answer to this question is, yes; the number of entities can indeed be brought down. However, this requires exerting some sort of force. For example, to reduce the number of papers on a desk, some sort of organizing process must be undertaken. This process requires effort. Extrapolating this to an organizational level, such organizing processes cost both effort and money. Therefore, reducing the accumulation of stochastic entities is not as straightforward as one might think.

[1]In this context, "stable" refers to the likelihood of a given state remaining in its current form without any additional intervention or force.