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Academics at Play

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Academics at play: Why the "publication game" is more than a metaphor

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Abstract

It is increasingly common to describe academic research as a "publication game," a metaphor that connotes instrumental strategies for publishing in highly rated journals. However, we suggest that the use of this metaphor is problematic. In particular, the metaphor allows scholars to make a convenient, but ultimately misleading, distinction between figurative game-playing on one hand (i.e. pursuing external career goals through instrumental publishing) and proper research on the other hand (i.e. producing intrinsically meaningful research). In other words, the "publication game" implies that while academic researchers may behave *just like* players, they are not *really* playing a game. Drawing on semi-structured interviews, we show that this metaphor prevents us, ironically, from fully grasping the lusory attitude, or play-mentality, that characterizes academic work among critical management researchers. Ultimately, we seek to stimulate reflection about how our choice of metaphor can have performative effects in the university and influence our behavior in unforeseen and potentially undesirable ways.

Keywords

Academic labor, metaphors, publication game, research assessment exercises

Introduction

Academia is often characterized as a game that involves players and rules. For example, scholars are said to be involved in a "publication game" (Townsend, 2012), a "publish-or-perish game" (Martin, 2014), or a "research game" (Lucas, 2006). While some commentators suggest that journal publishing is "something of a game" (McDaniel and Childers, 2011: 171) that ought to be played in the pursuit of academic success, others worry about the risks–both to one's research

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practices and to the culture of collegiality in universities–involved in "playing the game" (Kalfa et al., 2018; Prasad, 2013). Scholars are thus encouraged to follow the "rules of the game" (Gioia, 2019) to survive in an increasingly competitive academic environment at the same time as they are urged to avoid engaging in forms of "gamesmanship" that could lead to questionable research practices (MacDonald and Kam, 2007, 2011). The distinction, here, is between the "publication game" as a set of institutional norms for developing one's academic career and the "publication game" as a set of underhand techniques for cynically gaming the system to one's own professional advantage. Both approaches, however, are about publishing in highly rated journals, whether through rule-following or rule-bending. This tells us that the idea of "playing the publication game" has become a prominent, albeit ambiguous, metaphor to describe strategies of academic publishing in the contemporary university.

In this article, we argue that the use of this metaphor is problematic. Drawing on theories of analogical reasoning, we argue that this type of figurative language involves a logic of disavowal, that is, an assertion that A is not literally B. In our case, the metaphor of the publication game–which features prominently in our interviews with academics in the field of critical management studies (CMS)–implies that while researchers may behave *just like* players, they are not *really* playing a game. The metaphor therefore allows critical scholars to make a convenient distinction between figurative game-playing on one hand (i.e. pursuing external career goals through instrumental publishing) and "proper" research on the other hand (i.e. producing intrinsically meaningful research). If the publication game is nothing other than a placeholder for academic careerism, then critical scholars can always decide to stop playing the game and return to their "real" work. However, our article suggests that this distinction is misleading. As we will see, critical scholars often approach their work with the same type of mentality as players of a game, to the extent that it is no longer possible to determine what is done in the pursuit of instrumental career goals and what is done in the pursuit of more scholarly objectives. Our main point is that the metaphor of the publication game prevents us, ironically, from fully grasping the "lusory attitude" (Suits, 2005), or play-mentality, that characterizes academic work among critical scholars. By continuing to view the publication game solely as a metaphor, we risk overlooking the damaging effects that this play-mentality has on the production of knowledge in the field of CMS.

The article is structured as follows. The following section examines the use and limitations of metaphors in organizational analysis. We then outline the key features of game-playing according to play theorists, notably the philosophers Johan Huizinga, Roger Caillois, and Bernard Suits, before turning to our empirical section. In the discussion, we suggest that the metaphor of the publication game hides (rather than reveals) what is most central to the analogy and, consequently, that our respondents are more captured by the spirit of play than the metaphor of the publication game implies. We conclude by offering some reflections on how we might sensitize ourselves to the lusory attitude in the hope of resisting the temptation to engage in instrumental publishing.

Metaphors and the logic of disavowal

Metaphors pervade our lives, helping us to make sense of reality and engage with other people. Whenever we speak about "winning" an argument, making a "tasteless" remark, or "planting" an idea in someone's mind, we are using figurative language (derived from sport, food, and gardening). Metaphors provide a conceptual framework for communicating our ideas and guiding our behavior in everyday life, which suggests that "the way we think, what we experience, and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor" (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980: 3). In particular, metaphors frame our "perceptions and interpretations of reality" in organizational contexts

(Cornelissen et al., 2008: 8), especially since metaphors carry their own set of underlying assumptions about the nature and purpose of organizations (Morgan, 1986; Örtenblad et al., 2017).

Commonly understood, a metaphor is a word or phrase that describes something that the word or phrase in question is not literally applicable to. This is captured in the technical definition of metaphor as "a comparison in which the first term A (that is, the topic or tenor) is asserted to bear a partial resemblance (that is, the ground) to the second term B (that is, the vehicle)" (Cornelissen, 2006: 707). A metaphor is thus a mode of indirect representation that links together two fields of meaning, which "brings out the thisness of a that, or the thatness of a this," to use Burke's (1969: 503) felicitous phrase. In our case, the "publication game" can be seen as a root metaphor for understanding developments in the structure of academic careers. This metaphor connects two fields of meaning–that is, academic work (the topic) and game-playing (the vehicle)–by revealing the "partial resemblance" of one to the other.

Of course, there are philosophical objections to the concept of metaphor. If metaphor is understood as a form of indirect representation (i.e. we can describe reality obliquely by using figurative language), then it also implies the opposite: namely, direct representation between a word and a thing (i.e. we can describe reality accurately by using literal language). But as we know from structural linguistics, the meaning of a word cannot be isolated from its relation to other words (De Saussure, 2011). Put simply, there is no way to "accurately" describe the world around us; there is always an indelible shortfall, or surplus, between a word and a thing. This leads Derrida (1974) to conclude that language itself is already metaphorical or, as Bal (2006) puts it, that "what seems literal is a metaphor whose metaphoricity has been forgotten" (p. 163). This places a question mark over the very concept of metaphor.

However, in this article we are interested less in philosophical theories of metaphor than in the sociological analysis of metaphors-in-use. Even if we accept that language is ultimately metaphorical, it is also true that people (ourselves included) use metaphors in daily life *as if* there were a clear distinction between the figurative and the literal. Quite apart from any philosophical objections, metaphors practically help us to make sense of the world around us and communicate what we see and experience. We are therefore interested in what social actors achieve by drawing on such rhetorical tropes and how figurative language influences organizational behavior–in our case, how critical scholars relate to their own work.

From this perspective, we may ask whether the use of metaphors illuminate established meanings (Oswick et al., 2002; Oswick and Jones, 2006; Tsoukas, 1991) or create new meanings (Boxenbaum and Rouleau, 2011; Cornelissen, 2005; Inns, 2002). From the former perspective (the "comparisons model"), metaphors are possible because there is an *already existing* overlap between the topic and the vehicle, which permits some resemblance–as well as residual difference–between them. These similarities, or "deep identities" (Tsoukas, 1991: 574), remain largely hidden until the metaphor is used to highlight striking or surprising similarities between the two domains. Applying this to our own case, it assumes there is something that academics and players of a game share from the outset (e.g. the ability to strategize, competition between opponents, advancement through a series of contests) that makes the metaphor of the publication game conceivable in the first place.

From the latter perspective (the "domains-interaction model"), however, any resemblance between the two domains is constructed through the process of analogical reasoning (Cornelissen, 2004: 709). The ground does not contain any common features between the different fields of meaning, but rather consists of a blank space upon which the imaginative juxtaposition of domains creates new meanings (Cornelissen, 2005: 756). Applying this to our own case, it assumes that there are no shared characteristics between academic researchers and players of a game until we bring together the two domains through the inventive use of figurative language.

For us, the domains-interaction approach is more compelling because it draws attention to the ways in which metaphors come to shape our perception of reality in certain ways. In other words, metaphors are not simply semantic phenomena based on pre-existing meanings; rather, they involve active processes of interpretation and re-interpretation among and between different social groups. For example, in his study of the "military metaphor" in corporate settings, Mutch (2006: 753) proposes to examine "not whether practice in the organization is actually like military practice, but what effects such language has on action within the organization". In this case, the military metaphor assumes that organizations are, by analogy, subject to command and control with strict hierarchies and vertical lines of communication. Although organizations may be far more diverse and complex than this simplistic metaphor implies, it nonetheless has a powerful "performative effect" (Mutch, 2006: 753) in shaping how we think and behave in corporate settings. In this way, metaphors may reinforce certain vested interests by prioritizing one vision of reality over another (Tinker, 1986). In addition, these vested interests may remain implicit and hidden within metaphorical tropes (Müller, 2018). By paying close attention to the way that figurative language serves to frame reality for participants, in the manner of "self-fulfilling prophecies" (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980: 156), we will be able to shed light on how alternatives may be rendered unthinkable.

Tourish and Hargie (2012) extend this insight by arguing that metaphors frequently function on the basis of an "exclusion principle." As well as opening up new avenues for thought and communication, they suggest, "metaphors also work by *excluding* categories of meaning from comprehension and discussion" (Tourish and Hargie, 2012: 1048; emphasis in original). For example, when giving evidence to a British parliamentary committee, senior bankers drew on a series of root metaphors (e.g. "passive observers," "penitent learners") that served to diminish their responsibility in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. Tourish and Hargie (2012) therefore urge us to focus our attention on what falls outside the overlap between the topic and the vehicle as a way of showing how organizational actors use root metaphors to avoid talking about a particular topic (in the banker's case, guilt, liability, and accountability).

Metaphors, then, both illuminate (by constructing similarity between two domains of meaning) and conceal (by excluding other domains of meaning). In this article, we acknowledge these insights but go one step further. As we will argue, the very nature of metaphorical thinking enforces a logic of disavowal (i.e. "A is not literally B") upon the subject. While metaphors highlight an overlap between the topic and the vehicle, as the comparisons model suggests, the logic of disavowal also ensures that the respective domains of meanings, to which the topic and the vehicle "belong," remain separate. Instead of highlighting "deep identities," to use Tsoukas's phrase, we suggest that metaphorical thinking implies, by contrast, a deep *disidentity* between the vehicle and the topic. The logic of disavowal permits us to imagine, for example, that academic game-playing is not really game-playing; it is a metaphorical comparison, not a literal description (e.g. the metaphor of "academic game-playing" is a figurative way to describe instrumental publishing). On this view, metaphors do not only exclude other domains of meaning; they also maintain a distance between the topic and the vehicle that, at times, can be misleading. The logic of disavowal thus extends the exclusion principle by making it immanent to the structure of metaphor itself.

Against this background, we now turn to our main line of inquiry. In what follows, we will examine how a root metaphor–the "publication game"–is used in situ within a specific community and how it affects the way participants think and behave as members of this community. We are interested in the fact that our respondents talk about academic game-playing in metaphorical terms, but we warn against the restrictions that this metaphorical way of thinking imposes upon critical scholars via the logic of disavowal. This approach leads to two research questions that will guide our subsequent analysis. First, how does metaphorical game-talk among our respondents influence the way they relate to their own work? Second, what happens when we start to understand critical

scholars as players of a game? As we will show, when our respondents speak about the "publication game," they implicitly accept the distinction between the literal and the figurative: precisely because academic game-playing is understood metaphorically, our respondents can assert that they do not *really* play a game. It is this belief that we seek to subject to scrutiny in this article, and it is on this basis that we suggest that play theory–to which we now turn–has a lot to offer our analysis of academic work.

To play a game

At the outset, it is worth reflecting on the confusing distinction between "play" and "game." In the English language, "play" is sometimes taken to refer to any free-form recreational activity while "game" is sometimes said to denote any rule-bound competitive activity. However, French (*jeux*), Spanish (*juego*), German (*Spiel*), Dutch (*spel*), and Turkish (*oyun*)–to name but a few–make no distinction between "play" and "game," while in English the phrase "to play a game" already suggests that such a distinction is arbitrary at best. In this article, we therefore understand "game-playing" as a form of play.

More important than the play/game distinction is the "lusory attitude" (Suits, 2005) that one adopts during play activity–whether it is physical sports, cerebral games, games of chance, or improvisational performance. The lusory attitude arises from the player's willingness to become engrossed in the alternate reality of the game where "purposive relations are curiously suspended" (Gadamer, 2004: 102). When one adopts a play-mentality, all that matters is to play according to the rules that constitute this alternate reality; all other goals in life (e.g. earning money, getting promotion, finding a partner) are momentarily set aside. To this extent, play is a voluntary activity that stands "outside 'ordinary' life as being not 'not serious', but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly" (Huizinga, 1955: 13). Play thus establishes its own temporal and spatial dimension, a "magical circle" (Huizinga, 1955: 10) that stands in contrast to daily affairs. Following from this definition, the lusory attitude relates to four features of game-playing that are often highlighted by play theorists: (1) play is guided by rules, (2) play is unproductive, (3) play is related to freedom, and (4) play involves a beginning and end. We will now briefly discuss these characteristics before measuring them against academic game-playing.

Play is guided by rules

Play is guided by rules that are arbitrary and do not serve any purpose beyond playing the game. In this context, Suits (2005) speaks of the "inefficiency" (p. 55) of the rules of the game from the perspective of ordinary life. If your objective is to put a ball in a hole, then using a golf club to attain this goal is highly inefficient and unnecessary–yet this is precisely the point in the realm of games. Consequently, Suits (2005) defines game-playing as "the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles" (p. 55). The limitations imposed by rules, therefore, provide the very motivation for players to play games. This also holds for forms of free-play, such as musical improvisation or child's play, where not all the rules are fixed in advance.

Play is unproductive

Given that the impetus for play is not directed by concerns in real life, play is–minimally–not aimed at producing anything that is of value in the real world. If game-playing happens to produce remnants outside the ludic sphere, then these must be considered as mere side-effects. A strong formulation of this point is found in Caillois' (2001: 45) thesis that professional players do not,

strictly speaking, play; they are simply doing their paid work. Others, however, note that this ignores the play-mentality that is needed to be successful in playing a game (Suits, 2005). For example, a professional football player must be able to block out instrumental goals, including their own monetary rewards, in order to play well. However, by virtue of being separated from ordinary life, game-playing is at the very least not *guided* by worldly interests.

Play is related to freedom

Freedom in game-playing can be viewed in terms of Berlin's (1969) concepts of negative and positive freedom, or "freedom from" and "freedom to": the former refers to the freedom gained by means of being protected from outside influence or external forces, whereas the latter refers to the freedom to shape one's own life according to one's own will. Caillois (2001) suggests that game-playing is related to negative freedom: given that game-playing is separated from worldly relations, a player cannot–by definition–be forced to play a game. This emphasizes the voluntary nature of game-playing: "A game which one would be forced to play would at once cease being play" (Caillois, 2001: 6). Turner (1982), meanwhile, draws a link between game-playing and positive freedom insofar as games and sports can be viewed as a "part of an individual's freedom, of [their] growing self-mastery, even self-transcendence" (p. 37). Game-playing, here, involves a freedom from the expectations that typically govern daily life (e.g. being efficient at work) and thus allows for creative experimentation with one's own capacities.

Play has a beginning and an end

When players enter a game, they are cognizant of the fact that they are temporarily inhabiting an "other" world where normal rules do not apply. Game-playing is therefore characterized by "a special awareness of second reality or of a free unreality, as against real life" (Caillois, 2001: 10). To this extent, game-playing has a beginning and an end. Gadamer (2004), however, offers a more nuanced view: "The player knows very well what play is, and that what he [sic] is doing is 'only a game'; but he does not know what exactly he 'knows' in knowing that" (p. 103). For Gadamer, taking on a lusory attitude means that players lose the capacity to reflect on the game due to the special mode of subjectivity that playing requires. This capacity of play to shape the subjectivity of their players is also emphasized by Huizinga (1955), who notes that "[a]ny game can at any time wholly run away with the players" (p. 8). This raises a question to which we will return: to what extent are players always aware, when they are in play, that they are playing?

In what follows, we will reflect on these characteristics of game-playing to make sense of our empirical data. Before this, we will discuss our method and reflect on our own motives for writing this article.

Method

This study is part of a broader project on research and publication practices among critical scholars in the business school. When we began this research project in 2011, both of us had recently entered our first full-time lecturing positions shortly after completing our doctoral studies. As we found our feet in our new roles, we were surprised–perhaps naïvely–by the way that scholarship was assessed and rewarded according to purely quantitative metrics (such as journal rankings or citation indices) rather than more qualitative forms of assessments (such as a discussion about content or relevance). Both of us were gently invited by our heads of school or well-meaning colleagues to "play the game" and, to some extent, we tried to play along. One of the authors of this

article, for instance, found himself writing on topics he was not particularly interested in for highly rated journals he never actually read, all for the sake of building a portfolio of top-ranked publications. This led us to reflect on what had happened to critical management scholarship (including our own) in light of institutional forces that seemed to encourage instrumental publication over and above more scholarly concerns–and what we could do about it.

The project is therefore an attempt to think through some of the contradictions that CMS researchers are forced to navigate in the contemporary university. In particular, we wanted to explore how CMS scholars negotiate the institutional demand for highly ranked journal publications at the same time as maintain a critical ethos in relation to their work. As the project progressed, we became increasingly aware that metaphorical game-talk featured prominently in the personal narratives of such scholars. Without being prompted by the interviewer, virtually all our respondents referred to the idea of the "publication game." This suggests that academic game-playing is a common trope that permits researchers to reflect upon their own research practices, and so deserves further analysis. Of course, other professions also draw on the rhetoric of game-playing, which are–especially in the business world–typically sports-based (e.g. "team work," "game plan," "quick win") (Segrave, 2000). But CMS is interesting to consider for two reasons. First, we might expect CMS to take root in an environment where the capitalist values of competition and instrumentalism are less prominent than other kinds of epistemic virtues, such as non-performativity, denaturalization, and reflexivity (Fournier and Grey, 2000). The idea of enthusiastically "playing the publication game" is one that rubs against the principles that underpin critical management scholarship, and so the prevalence of the metaphor among our respondents raises a question about its role and impact on their research practices. Second and relatedly, the rise of game-talk among critical management scholars sheds light on how academic performance metrics such as research audits and citation indices are coming to redefine the nature and purpose of critical scholarship in the business school (Mingers and Willmott, 2013; Tourish and Willmott, 2015). We explored different aspects of the "publication game" in previous papers, including the suspension of subjectivity among critical scholars (Butler and Spoelstra, 2012), the reshaping of epistemic virtues within CMS (Butler and Spoelstra, 2014), and opportunities to resist instrumental publishing (Butler and Spoelstra, 2017). This article, by contrast, probes more deeply into the distinction between academic game-playing as a metaphor and academic game-playing as a lusory attitude.

Our method is based on in-depth semi-structured interviews with academic researchers who are associated with the CMS community. We chose to exclusively interview full professors because they can be considered prominent members of and gatekeepers to the field of which they are a part. This is reflected in the fact that our respondents not only publish in top-tier outlets but also influence the kind of research that is published in them by serving on the editorial boards of prominent academic journals. While this approach obviously does not allow us to access the experiences of early-career researchers who may equally be part of the publication game (see, for example, Bristow et al., 2017; Robinson et al., 2017), it nonetheless provides insight into the way research is conducted by senior members of academic staff in the business school, especially in terms of the institutional pressures and personal motivations for "playing the game" within the field of CMS.

Overall, we conducted 31 interviews with CMS researchers. We began by conducting five short pilot interviews (each lasting approximately 20 minutes) with key informants during the biennial CMS conference in summer 2011. This was followed by our main period of data collection between autumn 2011 and summer 2013, which involved conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews with a further 26 professors. In total, the longest interview was 1 hour and 50 minutes and the shortest was 30 minutes, with most interviews lasting 1 hour. At the time of our interviews, 20 of our respondents were based in the United Kingdom, five elsewhere in Europe, three in Australia, and

two in the United States. A total of 25 of our respondents were male and six were female. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed.

Like other researchers who study the work of academics, we used "the obvious advantage of opportunistic sampling because of insider contacts and knowledge" (Clarke et al., 2012: 7). To this extent, we already knew many of our respondents on both a personal and professional level. On the one hand, this allows for a deeper and more subtle understanding of our respondents' narratives by contrast to other, more unfamiliar occupational groups. On the other hand, there is a risk that we are *too* familiar with the assumptions and norms of behavior among our respondents, which could lead to an inability to reflect critically on their experiences (which, after all, overlap to some extent with our own) (Alvesson, 2003). Aware of this potential hazard, we sought to avoid relying on our own personal experiences to make sense of our respondents' narratives and instead developed a more provocative and norm-breaking approach to our interviews and in our subsequent analysis. This involved, for example, asking our respondents at the outset "how did you become so excellent?," derived from their performance in national research audits such as the Research Excellence Framework (REF) or Excellence in Research in Australia (ERA). Some respondents were uneasy with this description and sought to distance themselves from the label of excellence, while others responded by laughing off the question. In both cases, we found it to be a useful entry-point into a deeper discussion about the kinds of rewards and tensions CMS researchers encounter during their career, precisely because it was a confrontational and sometimes uncomfortable way of approaching the topic of journal publishing and research assessments.

In line with the principles of interpretivist research (Corbin and Strauss, 2008; Prasad, 2005), we are interested in the assumptions, meanings, and judgments attached to academic work by our respondents. The purpose of interpretivist research is not, of course, to uncover law-like generalities in the social world but rather to understand how social actors make sense of their everyday reality through narrative accounts of context-bound practices (Bryman, 2012). With this in mind, we organized the research process as follows. Having concluded the main period of data collection, both authors independently read each transcript and then manually coded the interview in line with "thematic analysis" (Shank, 2006), a process that seeks to identify patterns and regularities within a network of themes. We then discussed each interview transcript together and subsequently developed three main themes: "publication strategies," "academic game-playing," and "pressures and tensions in academic work." After we had thematically organized the raw data into these themes, the second author took responsibility for writing the first draft of the theoretical sections and the empirical analysis. Following this, the first author added nuance to the analysis, further developed the theoretical sections, and fleshed out the discussion section. During this process of data analysis, we were able to establish a set of connections between individual narratives of research practices, the institutional conditions of the business school, and the broader forces that shape the production of knowledge in the university. It is to the empirical data that we now turn.

Academic game-playing: from metaphor to lusory attitude

In this section, we examine the way that critical scholars discuss their involvement in the "publication game." We do so by measuring the metaphor of academic game-playing against the characteristics of game-playing as outlined by play theorists.

Does the publication game have rules?

As we saw, play theory suggests that game-playing is characterized by rules. To this extent, many of our respondents view national research audits (e.g. REF, ERA) as institutional rule-setting

mechanisms. Likewise, our respondents claim that journal rankings also play a role in regulating the rules of the publication game, whether in the form of the Chartered Association of Business Schools' Academic Journal Guide ("ABS list") in the United Kingdom and elsewhere in Europe or institution-specific journal rankings in the United States and Australia. One respondent notes that the "rules"–that is, which academic outlets to target for maximum career advantage–have gradually become more fixed over time:

> When I got my first lectureship in 1999 . . . there wasn't this kind of game-playing, or clear rules of the game with clear standards of measurement, whereas now there seems to be. And I can see some young scholars who are understandably quite happy to subject themselves to these rules of the game and to begin to career-plan very instrumentally around them. (R22)

This respondent suggests that there are some formal rules within the business school, usually tied to journal rankings and research audits. For example, in the UK context, only articles in three- and four-rated journals are seen as "REF-able" (R4) (for example, publications that can be submitted to the United Kingdom's national research audit), while one- and two-rated publications are typically excluded from assessment committees. However, as another respondent observes, research audits do not explicitly articulate the rules of the game at the outset: "The thing about . . . the REF is you don't fully know what the rules of the game are until the game has been played" (R13). For example, the criteria of assessment in research exercises are not entirely predictable due to the expert panels that evaluate submitted research. What is more, journal rankings–alongside other proxies for quality such as impact factors and citation rates–are potentially changeable (e.g. a two-star journal could potentially become a three-rated journal), even if the high end of such lists are relatively stable. As a consequence, academics may be required to second-guess the rules of the game as they go along. The difference of opinion between Respondent 22 and Respondent 13 perhaps indicates that some critical scholars see academic game-playing as a *game* (where the rules are predetermined), whereas others view it as more strictly speaking as *free-play* (where the rules are made up as one goes along). A more nuanced view is expressed by another respondent who admits to acting *as if* the rules of the game are fixed even though, in reality, they are "socially constructed" (R6) and therefore provisional and subject to revision. What these sentiments tell us is that the publication game is deemed to be rule-bound–even if these rules are, in theory, open and malleable.

Is the publication game unproductive?

Play theorists claim that game-playing is free from "purposive relations" (Gadamer, 2004: 102) that produce value in the real world. Here, we see a parallel to the way that the publication game is understood by many of our respondents. Indeed, articles that appear in premier outlets are often seen as the antithesis of meaningful or relevant research. As one respondent puts it, academic journals do not always offer a site to pursue intellectual inquiry, but rather provide little more than a training ground for refining one's skills in gamesmanship:

> All I learn from writing a paper is how to play the game. I don't learn about ideas . . . I participate in and play the game of academia, as we're programmed to do at the moment. These are the rules of the game, so I do it. But I don't learn. (R16)

On this view, the game of academia is strictly autotelic: it has a purpose in and of itself, separate from more traditional forms of scholarly activity such as the cumulative development of academic knowledge.

Others, however, view the publication game as productive in contrast to "proper" scholarship. For example, one respondent distinguishes between "instrumentalism and game-playing," on the one hand, and "the stuff that [comes] out of some sense of passion [and] genuine curiosity" (R30), on the other. The implication is that academic game-playing is productive (i.e. it involves material and professional rewards) whereas scholarship should be free from worldly entanglements (i.e. it involves a deeply personal investment beyond mere career advancement). Another respondent makes a similar point, highlighting the instrumental nature of academic game-playing in comparison to the traditional scholarly enterprise:

> I think the game has changed to the extent that it's no longer about intellectual engagement, it's about output. And I think it creates a . . . kind of mercenary, almost banker-like mentality in terms of individualism. (R4)

On the one hand, instrumental publishing is seen as a form of "work," firmly located in the world of institutional targets and performance indicators. On the other hand, intrinsically meaningful research is framed as a type of "play," since it is "connected with no material interest" (Huizinga, 1955: 15) in the university. This tension between work and play is highlighted by several respondents:

> I've reached where I'm at, in terms of my chair and everything else, because of my publications. So you have to play the game in order to do this. (R17)

> You're being paid for being a professor . . . and if I want to play the normal game, then I should at least comply with some normal rules. And if I want to do something completely different, then I shouldn't have aspired to become a professor at the university. (R24)

From this perspective, academic game-playing is best understood as the work that comes with accepting a position at a university–namely, targeting premier outlets in the pursuit of professional prestige and promotion opportunities. To this extent, the publication game is a production-oriented activity par excellence since its main objective is to generate publications in top-tier journals for the purpose of career-building, rather than "intellectual engagement" (R4) or "genuine curiosity" (R30).

Is the publication game related to freedom?

For most play theorists, game-playing is something that one engages in voluntarily; it is a realm of freedom where individuals can exercise and experiment with their own capacities, unhindered by external obligations. However, academia is increasingly seen as a competitive game that one *must* play. The price for failing to play the game is a less successful career, relegation to teaching-only positions, or even exit from the university. This ludic imperative is evinced by our respondents:

> You've *got to*, you know, play the game to some extent–you've *got to* cite the right people favourably. (R15; emphasis added)

> A couple of times you sort of write things and send them out just for the sake of getting them out there, something that you're not proud of. But you've *got to* play the game. (R11; emphasis added)

Rather than finding freedom within play, academic game-playing is portrayed instead as a necessary evil that may allow one to access "real" freedom outside the publication game. For instance:

> We don't need to be the slaves of the game, we don't need to be defined by the game, but at the same time we need to acknowledge that this is a game that we have to play. And beyond that we can do original, interesting and creative work. [. . .] You buy yourself freedom and you buy yourself the ability to be creative. (R21)

On the one hand, this respondent speaks of the obligatory nature of the game: one does not freely choose to play. On the other hand, he recognizes that one can "buy" oneself the freedom to do proper scholarship by playing the publication game. The problem, however, is that this freedom may never come; instead, one may become overtaken by the rules and lose oneself in the game. As another respondent puts it, the "liberating effects" of the game may in fact mean that one dedicates oneself not only to "blue-sky thinking" but also to "things that might feed into the next REF submission" (R6). The publication game thus has an ambiguous and paradoxical relationship to freedom. It is described as "constraining but . . . also liberating," compelling critical scholars to pursue certain research topics and target particular outlets at the same time as opening up a possible "space of freedom" for critical inquiry (R6). Another respondent reflects on this tension:

> I was like, "I am never going to, you know, play the game." But I . . . maybe lost sight of that a little bit . . . My plan was always to do what I have to do, and then I can subvert once I'm in position [to subvert]. But the amount of subverting I've done is not so much. (R14)

There is a melancholic realization, here, that the process of playing the game has come, bit by bit, to erode their critical ethos, chipping away at the principles that once guided their sense of academic purpose. This underlines the uneasy relationship between the publication game and freedom.

Does the publication game have a beginning and an end?

For play theorists, game-playing has a beginning and an end, taking place in a distinct time and space. In other words, players know when the game has started and they know when it has finished. This implies that players consciously adopt a temporary lusory attitude when they are in play. Some of our respondents spoke of playing the game in relation to publishing a journal article, which suggests that there is a beginning (i.e. writing the paper) and an end (i.e. publishing the paper). In this context, some respondents liken the notification of acceptance to winning in a competitive sport:

> I'm really competitive. So if this is where the game is, I want to be there. Which is awful, but how do you succeed in this game if you're not competitive? [. . .] Two weeks ago, I got a conditional acceptance of a paper in [an ABS 4-rated journal]. I was like, "Yes! I've shown the bastards I can do it!." (R16)

> I think there's also a macho element of it, saying "I'm bloody well going to get this through, somehow I've got to be victorious . . . I'm going to crack this one!" [*laughs*]. (R1)

Playing the publication game, in this sense, is an intermittent interruption of academic activity: at times one plays the game, at other times one does not. Crucially, our respondents purport to be fully aware of adopting a lusory attitude in relation to their work, that is, when they are a proper researcher and when they are a mere player.

However, we noted that play theorists do not always agree whether or not a player can be fully aware of the fact that they are playing a game. We also encountered this hesitation in some of our interviews. As one respondent admits, "I'm so colonized that I have a hard time thinking outside

of journal publications" (R17). This strikes us as similar to Gadamer's characterization of the player's mode of subjectivity as one in which the lusory attitude prevents us from reflecting critically on our own practices because we are so absorbed in playing the game. Indeed, as one of our respondents puts it (paraphrasing Bourdieu), for critical scholars to become aware of how academic game-playing shapes their research practices would be like a fish discovering water (R27)–they are so immersed in it that they are not able to recognize it.

This point is vividly demonstrated by another respondent. She initially claims that she considers herself to be "selectively playing with these regimes for certain purposes" (R28), which implies that she temporarily adopts a lusory attitude. However, later in the interview, she acknowledges that the boundary between academic game-playing and proper scholarship is, for her, not always clear-cut: "When you asked, 'What is my best work?' . . . my temptation is [to say], 'Well, the stuff that's published in the best journals, I guess'" (R28). There is a dawning awareness here that she has outsourced her judgment to the rules of the game (tellingly, she refers to the "best" journals rather than, more accurately, to highly ranked journals). This suggests that critical scholars may find it difficult to know when they are in play and when they are outside play; in fact, the boundaries between the two spheres may be blurred and porous. Such a realization serves to problematize the narratives of respondents who imagine themselves to be "on top of the game" (R27) by casting doubt on the idea that critical scholars are able to play the game "selectively" to their own advantage.

Discussion

As we saw, play theorists conceptualize play as being separated from the real world in four ways: it is rule-bound, non-instrumental, voluntary, and has a beginning and an end. Our respondents, meanwhile, talk about academic game-playing as loosely rule-bound, mostly instrumental, obligatory, and as an activity that may or may not have a clear beginning or end. This points to a disparity between the metaphor of the publication game and the characteristics of game-playing. What further strengthens this view is the fact that the publication game, paradoxically, seems to resemble *work* while "proper" research seems to resemble *play* (i.e. separated from instrumental motives and based instead on curiosity and intellectual exploration). This appears to confirm the claim that game-talk among our respondents is largely metaphorical in nature and therefore useful in describing careerist tendencies among CMS researchers. In other words, while critical scholars may, in certain respects, behave *just like* players, they are of course not *really* playing a game.

As we noted earlier, understanding something as a metaphor can serve to restrict thought and curtail reflection, providing comfort in the assumption that "A is not literally B." Such a logic of disavowal is precisely what we see in our empirical material. By understanding the publication game as a metaphor for instrumental careerism, critical scholars seek to distance themselves from institutional mechanisms like journal rankings and research audits, thus downplaying the way academic performance metrics shape research practices in the field. If the publication game is understood as a convenient metaphor to describe instrumental careerism and strategic publishing, then one can always decide simply to stop "playing the game" and get back to "proper" research where one is guided by other, more scholarly, concerns. For most of the academics we have spoken to, however, this is far from a straightforward possibility. In truth, the separation that academics make between academic game-playing and "proper" research is by no means clear cut. Far from concluding that the publication game is merely metaphorical, therefore, we observe that academics increasingly find themselves adopting a lusory attitude in relation to their research.

There are a number of indications that the lusory attitude is more common among academics than many of our respondents recognize. This resonates with Kalfa et al.'s (2018) suggestion that

academic researchers "tend to 'forget' that they are caught up in the game" and, as a result, misrecognize the forces that shape their research practices (p. 277). As we noted, some of our respondents find it difficult to articulate the extent to which the publication game has affected their approach to research. This point is captured by one respondent's comment that critical scholars are so immersed in game-playing that to become aware of its impact on research practices would be akin to a fish discovering water. We also noticed "slips" in the accounts of our respondents that point in the direction of being more influenced by the publication game than their own narratives would suggest–for example, speaking of the (qualitatively) "best journals" rather than the more accurate (quantitatively) "highly ranked journals." In a number of cases, we found that researchers who claim to be able to maintain a clear separation between academic game-playing and "proper" research also admit to producing work that is heavily implicated in game-playing strategies, for example, agreeing to "tone down" critical viewpoints in order to placate hostile reviewers (R8) or writing long response letters to editors to "bore them to death" and "grind them down" so they are more likely to accept the paper without further revisions (R27). While not all critical scholars may be willing to admit engaging in such instrumental ends-oriented activities as part of their normal research practices (even perhaps to themselves), it is clear that the lusory attitude is by no means uncommon in the business school.

These insights contribute to our understanding of metaphors-in-use. On the one hand, the "comparisons model"–that is, the idea that figurative language illuminates pre-existing common ground between the topic and the vehicle–is unable to grasp the performative effects of the publication game metaphor. After all, there is nothing about crafting a piece of research, choosing a publication outlet, and responding to editorial comments that forces us to adopt a lusory attitude. But once we start to think about journal publications as a way of gaining "competitive advantage" over our colleagues by targeting top-ranked outlets, then the nature and purpose of scholarship starts to change, not least because we may start to modify our behavior in line with the metaphor. The comparisons model thus underestimates the extent to which new meanings are created through the process of analogical reasoning, which in turn has performative effects within an organizational context such as academia.

By the same token, we can also level criticism at the "domains-interaction model" for neglecting to consider the way in which metaphors limit our horizons and preclude certain modes of thought. There is, of course, merit in the claim that metaphors create new meanings through social processes of interpretation and reinterpretation. But equally important is the way that metaphors categorically exclude certain ways of seeing and thereby blind us to other possible realities. In particular, we ought to pay more attention to the way in which root metaphors enable social actors to avoid acknowledging troubling predicaments–in this case, that the lusory attitude is so prevalent within CMS that it damages the quality of scholarship in the field. As we have shown, this exclusion principle is immanent to the structure of metaphor itself, which suggests that the use of metaphor can, ironically, hide what is most central to the analogy. To return to Burke's (1969) phrase, while metaphors serve to bring out "the thisness of a that," the logic of disavowal means that "this" can never *be* "that"–or, in our case, that playing the publication game does not impact on the mentality of the player as "real" game-playing does (p. 503).

Instead of mapping out the overlap between topic and vehicle, we should instead understand academic work through the full weight of theoretical concepts. One such concept is, of course, the lusory attitude, which–instead of asserting that game-playing and academic research are essentially separate phenomena with partial resemblances to each other–suggests that critical scholars increasingly do approach their work with a game-playing mentality. What we have tried to do in this article is to show that, if we continue to view the publication game solely as a metaphor, we will fail to grasp the negative consequences that this play-mentality has on the production of CMS research.

Approaching the publication game on a conceptual rather than on a metaphorical level also opens up further opportunities for critical analysis. In particular, one may ask to what extent game-playing in academia corresponds to different types of games that have been discussed by play theorists. For instance, links may be drawn between game-playing in academia and the nature of competitive games, which corresponds to Caillois' game-category of *agôn*. For Caillois (2001), *agôn* is based on the idea of a level-playing field so that players can have their "superiority in a given area recognized" (p. 15), which corresponds to the way research assessment exercises are characterized by some of our respondents. Caillois, however, goes further in suggesting that *agôn* becomes corrupted when it starts to become intertwined with reality. He warns in particular against the situation where no "referee or decision is recognized" (Caillois, 2001: 46), with a clear analogy to widespread doubt among our respondents about the impartiality of editors and other gatekeepers in the publishing process.

Thinking conceptually rather than metaphorically thus allows us to uncover a "zone of indiscernibility" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994: 276) between the publication game and "proper" research. This taps into Ehrmann's (1968) suggestion that the "interior" occupied by game-playing exists only in relation to the "exterior" occupied by quotidian reality–that is, both the play sphere and real life "participate in the same economy" (pp. 42–43). This is a crucial point in relation to our findings: far from being separated from "proper" research, the lusory attitude is intrinsically tangled up within the economic and political reality in which CMS scholarship is produced. For instance, when one of our respondents claims to distinguish between "instrumentalism and game-playing," on the one hand, and "the stuff that [comes] out of some sense of passion . . . genuine curiosity and care" (R30), on the other hand, they risk overlooking the mutually conditioning aspects of "game-playing" and "academic work." What allows critical scholars to sustain this separation is precisely the idea that the publication game is nothing but a metaphor for instrumental careerism that is never at risk of contaminating their "real" research. In effect, critical scholars can say that, while they may occasionally dabble in instrumental publishing, they are still in control of the game (and may leave it at any time). However, as we have seen, there are indications that critical scholars are more captured by the spirit of play than they acknowledge. Given that the distinction between academic game-playing and "real" research is difficult to sustain in any clear-cut way, it becomes incumbent upon us to recognize the place of the lusory attitude in academic work, with its various risks and rewards.

Conclusion

In this article, we have sought to open up a debate about the influence of the lusory attitude in academia–that is, the way in which "the game masters [its] players" (Gadamer, 2004: 106). Critical management studies is an interesting field to study because at the heart of the CMS project is a commitment to epistemic virtues such as non-performativity, denaturalization, and reflexivity (Fournier and Grey, 2000). As such, the idea of wholeheartedly "playing the publication game" is anathema to the principles that underpin critical management research. This perhaps explains the way that critical scholars distance themselves from the worst excesses of instrumental publishing through the use of figurative language, which causes them to underestimate the ways in which their research practices are already shaped by a play-mentality. However, we are not saying that the lusory attitude is limited to critical scholars or that CMS researchers are uniquely prone to self-deception. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that academics from other management disciplines also engage in forms of ludic behavior, such as game-playing around scientific methods found in positivist leadership studies (Butler, Delaney and Spoelstra, 2017).

Further research could show how the lusory attitude occurs in other research fields, both within and beyond the business school.

We conclude by offering some reflections on how one might resist the temptation to engage in instrumental publishing. Elsewhere (Butler and Spoelstra, 2017), we invite critical scholars to ask themselves a series of "uncomfortable questions" about their research practices, including reflecting on their motives for writing on a particular topic, collaborating with particular co-authors, and submitting their work to particular journals. We can extend this list of uncomfortable questions by encouraging critical scholars to think about the metaphors they use to understand their work and how this affects their relationship to their own research. In particular, we urge scholars to reflect on how these metaphors, via the logic of disavowal, obscure the way the play-mentality shapes critical scholarship. Of course, it is not difficult to think of alternative metaphors to the publication game. For example, some have drawn on figurative language from the culinary world (in particular the Slow Food movement) and started talking about the contrast between "slow scholarship" and "fast food research," where the former refers to research that is fresh, sustainable, and lovingly prepared and the latter refers to cheap, mass-produced, and standardized publications (Berg and Seeber, 2016). Using such a metaphor not only provides a shared vocabulary for understanding academic research cultures based on the figurative tropes of "health" and "nutrition," but it also promotes an attitude that is opposed to the values of efficiency and homogeneity. However, we are not trying to promote this or that metaphor to describe our research practices. Instead, we are seeking to stimulate reflection about how our choice of metaphor can have performative effects in the university and affect our behavior in striking ways.

We realize that we may face the charge of hypocrisy for publishing in a highly ranked journal such as *Management Learning* (three-rated according to the latest iteration of the ABS list) while simultaneously pointing out the problems with instrumental publishing. Certainly, this article has endured multiple rounds of review where we occasionally lost sight of our original intentions in order to satisfy editorial and reviewer concerns. This illustrates just how difficult it is to keep a firm grip on what we do for in the name of our career and what we do in the name of scholarship, and–more fundamentally–problematizes the idea that a clear boundary exists between them in the first place. However, we do not believe that we ought to abandon journal publishing altogether, although that is certainly a viable option (Marinetto, 2017). Rather, we feel there is an opportunity for us to become more aware of the lusory attitude in order to mitigate some of its worst effects. For example, while there is much to gain from entering into dialogue with journal editors and reviewers, scholars should be wary of treating the review process as an agonistic contest between journal and author, a tug-of-war between the threat of rejection and the victory of publication. Likewise, it is one thing to cultivate fruitful collaborations with co-authors, but it is quite another thing to treat one's research team as a tactical unit to crush the competition in the pursuit of publication targets. Perhaps it is impossible to rid ourselves entirely of a play-mentality; perhaps some of the games that academics play are necessary under conditions of precarious employment and economic insecurity in the university. But, as critical scholars, it is important to acknowledge the possibility that, while we may think we are playing the game in our own subversive ways, we are in fact being played by the game itself.

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