

Implicit Mental Models in Teaching Cases: An Empirical Study of Popular MBA Cases in the United States and China

NENG LIANG

China Europe International Business School

JIAQIAN WANG

Monitor Group

To identify the possible mismatch between what MBA students are supposed to learn and what they are actually exposed to in the case methods, we analyzed the manifest and latent meanings of popular MBA teaching cases in the United States and China. Our findings suggest that despite repeated calls for a more holistic approach to management education, overemphasis on the rational framework persists. We identify five patterns common to both U.S. and Chinese cases; namely, rationalistic framework, undersocialized protagonist, strategy-driven organization, manager-as-analyst, and naïve and biased politics. We also discuss the likely causes for the biases and propose possible ways to develop better-balanced teaching cases.

In an ambiguous and uncertain world, the most difficult part of decision making is not choice making, but sense making (Weick, 1995). That is, how to digest the information “to structure the unknown” (Waterman, 1990: p. 41). In that sense, the most critical task of business education is not about teaching students analytical tools but developing appropriate “mental models.”

The case method plays an essential role in management education (Banning, 2003; Dooley & Skinner, 1977). According to “an introduction to cases” published by the Harvard Business School, the function of a case is to provide a “description of real business situations that serve as a metaphor of a particular set of problems” (Shapiro, 1984: 1). Taken together, these teaching cases “provide a useful and relevant set of metaphors that can be applied to most management situations” (p. 1).

We thank Dr. James Bailey and three anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments, and Dr. Kathleen Ross for providing the raw data of her dissertation. We are grateful to Drs. Rosalie Tung and Shalom Saar for their valuable suggestions. Editorial assistance from Qin Min and Kenneth Liang are gratefully acknowledged. All remaining errors are the responsibility of the authors.

Through the practice of analyzing hundreds of cases that describe how practicing managers deal with real business issues, students develop not only knowledge and skills, but also management “philosophies” (Shapiro, 1984).

Given this “philosophy-shaping role” of cases, questions inevitably arise. Are teaching cases value-neutral? What assumptions, perspectives, and mental models are conveyed to the students through the hundreds of cases that they are required to read and study for their MBA programs? This is important because cases might carry mental models and underlying assumptions that are not consistent with the stated mission of a given MBA curriculum. Moreover, cases might depict a distorted image of organizational life, thus making students ill-prepared for the real world.

Despite the importance of the case method in MBA education, its instructional foundation—the teaching cases themselves—has largely escaped empirical research. Using “case method” as the keyword, we searched the ABI/Inform Global database in its three most relevant subcategories: business education, curricula, and MBA programs and graduates. Within the subcategory of “MBA pro-

grams and graduates," the search for "case method" only produced six hits in the period of 1990–2003; within the subcategories of "business education" and "curricula," 26 and 25 hits, respectively. Most of those studies focus on the application of the case method only, rather than the cases per se. There is virtually no empirical study designed specifically to examine the underlying frameworks and assumptions embedded in MBA teaching cases. The only exception that we have found is the dissertation of Ross (1998), who analyzed the contents of the 36 best-selling Harvard Business School (HBS) cases.

In an attempt to broaden the Ross study, we replicated and extended her research in a Chinese context. Applying the same methodology Ross (1998) used in the study of Harvard cases, we first analyzed the contents of 30 Chinese MBA teaching cases published by Tsinghua University, one of China's most prestigious universities, and then juxtaposed and compared our results with those of Ross' (1998) study in a more open-ended, grounded-theory approach. We also adopted a multirater method that mitigated the single-rater bias embedded in Ross' study.

The balance of this article is organized as follows: In part 2, we review the literature on the case method and its potential pitfalls, as well as the four organizational perspectives that we use as the initial research framework. In part 3, we discuss research methodology; in part 4, present research findings, followed by discussions in part 5, and a summary and conclusions in part 6.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Case Method and Story Telling

The cornerstone of the case method is the teaching case. Lawrence (1953: 215) described a case as "the vehicle by which a chunk of reality is brought into the classroom to be worked over by the class and instructor." Erskine, Leenders, and Mauffette-Leenders (1981: 10) defined a case as "a description of an actual administrative situation, commonly involving a decision or problem. It is normally written from the viewpoint of the decision makers involved and allows the student to step figuratively into the shoes of the decision maker or problem solver." By describing real business situations that capture the complexity of organizational life, the case method gives participants firsthand experience in the analysis and evaluation of business situations.

To present the "real business situation," however, is no easy task. A case is typically written as

a semistory, told by case protagonists. But a story is always an interpretive account, and all interpretations are biased (Denzin, 1989). Bruner (1984: 5) made a useful distinction between a life as lived, a life as experienced, and a life as told. "A life as lived is what actually happens. A life as experienced consists of the images, feelings, sentiments, desires, thoughts, and meanings known to the person whose life it is . . . A life as told . . . is a narrative, influenced by the cultural conventions of telling, by the audience, and by the social context," and there are inevitable gaps between reality, experience, and expression.

Truthful representation of business reality is made even more difficult by the limited space for a typical teaching case. The case writer has to be very selective, as the story is constructed. In this regard, writing a case shares the same features as the writing of a biography, in that both are artful and selective endeavors that involve "a good deal of bold assertion and immodest neglect" (Maanen, Manning, & Miller, 1989: 5).

Although the case method has been debated quite extensively, the potential biases in case contents have received little rigorous research attention. Ross' (1998) study is an exception. Using a four-domain framework (reviewed below), she documented significant and pervasive biases in 36 best-selling Harvard Business School (HBS) cases. Ross finds that HBS cases are overwhelmingly rationalistic, executive-centric, instrumentalist, and objectivist.

Alternative Frameworks of Organizations

Because the purpose of the case method is to bring into the classroom "a chunk of reality," which is complex and multifaceted, it follows that teaching cases should present, as a whole, a balanced view of the many dimensions of the organizational life. The "truthfulness" of teaching cases should be evaluated from multiple theoretical perspectives that collectively represent all fundamental aspects of organizational life.

We selected the Bolman–Deal (2003) four-domain model (rational, human, political, and symbolic) for this study for two reasons. First, the framework is simple yet reasonably comprehensive. Second, it facilitates subsequent cross-comparison of Chinese and American cases, as it is the model used by Ross in her 1998 study. The Bolman–Deal model and its four dimensions are reviewed briefly below.

The Bolman–Deal model was initially published in 1984. Since then, it has been adopted and explored by a number of scholars (among others,

Bergquist, 1992; Dunford, 1992; Dunford & Palmer, 1995; and Ross, 1998). Based on comprehensive review of relevant social science literature, and in-depth interviews with practicing managers, Bolman and Deal identified four dimensions as essential to the understanding of organizations. These four different, but interrelated and partially overlapping domains are rational, human, political, and symbolic.

The Rational Domain

From the rational perspective, organizations are instruments designed to achieve specified goals. Organizations are "purposeful" in the sense that the activities and interactions of participants are centrally coordinated to achieve common objectives; behaviors in organizations are rational in the sense that roles and role relations are prescribed independently of the personal attributes of the individuals in the structure (Scott, 1992). In the rational domain, organizations are driven by strategies, and the role of management is to align strategies and structure with the external environment.

The Human Domain

Although people are intentionally rational, not all human behavior is the result of rationality. People do not leave their emotions and feelings at home when they come to work in the morning, and noneconomic objectives are pursued alongside economic objectives (Powell, 1992). Often the most important incentives in organizations are those of "a personal, non-materialistic character," and the very functioning of formal organizations "creates and requires informal organizations" (Barnard, 1938: 120, 145). In the human domain, the central issue is how to integrate human needs with organizational rationality.

The Political Domain

From the political perspective, organizations are coalitions of diverse individuals and groups with enduring differences in values and preferences (Scott, 1987). They are governed not by a single center, as is assumed in the rational perspective, but by a dominant coalition of interest groups. As such, organizations often operate with unresolved conflicts in goals (March & Shapiro, 1992). Although the intensity and scope of organization politics varies, it exists in virtually all organizations (Sussman, Lyle, Adams, Kuzmits, & Raho, 2002). From the human domain perspective, malfunctions arise from structural misalignment or from personal deficiency; while from the political perspective, divergent interests and resource scarcity inevitably turn organizations political.

The Symbolic Domain

Symbolism plays a critical role in human experience. In the rational domain, the point of life is choice. However, organizational life is only partly concerned with making decisions (March & Olsen, 1976). Decision making is often an arena for symbolic actions. Many events and processes are more important for what is expressed than for what is produced (Bolman & Deal, 2003). Seemingly insignificant rituals give meaning, and "meaning is the core of life" (March & Shapiro, 1992: 290). From this perspective, the most critical task for a leader is not the making of strategic decisions, but the shaping and protection of company values (Selznick, 1957).

The key features of the four-domain model are summarized in Table 1 below.

The brief review above suggests that if the purpose of the case method is to bring "the reality" of

TABLE 1
Overview of the Four-Domain Model

	Rational-Structural	Human	Political	Symbolic
Metaphor for Organization	Factory or machine	Family	Jungle	Carnival, temple, theater
Central Concept	Rules, roles, goals, policies, technology, structure, environment	Needs, skills, relationships	Power, conflict, competition, organizational politics	Culture, meaning, ceremony, stories, heroes
Image of Leadership	Social architecture	Empowerment	Advocacy	Inspiration
Basic Leadership Challenge	Attune structure to task, technology, and environment	Align organizational and human needs	Develop agenda and power base	Create faith, beauty, meaning

Note. Adapted from Bolman & Deal (2003: 16).

the organizational life into the MBA classroom, all four dimensions should be represented adequately in teaching cases, although not necessarily in every single case.

METHODOLOGY

Content and Narrative Analyses

To identify possible imbalances and biases in teaching cases, we used a combined method of content analysis and narrative analysis. *Content analysis* is a technique that makes inference by systematically and objectively identifying special characteristics of messages (Holsti, 1969). It is frequently used in turning free-flowing texts into a set of nominal variables. This systematic approach can be used with considerable flexibility. Some applications are comprehensive, and others more issue-centered. In this research, we applied content analysis to code each and every paragraph of the cases into the respective domains (R, H, P and S) to examine the overall balance of perspectives in MBA teaching cases.

Narrative analysis seeks to uncover underlying patterns in narratives (Denzin, 1989). A narrative is an analytic construct that unifies a group of events into a single story (Graffin, 1993). Narratives have a specific beginning, a series of intervening events or actions, and an end point that is arrived at based upon the numerous paths and the interconnections between the intervening actions (Graffin, 1992). By analyzing how these events are integrated and sequenced into a story and the narrative choices that are made along the way, narrative analysis can generate insights about the organizational life: its culture, processes, strategies, and member identities (Barry & Elmes, 1997). Numerous scholars have applied narrative analysis in management research, including the studies of organizational decisions and actions (O'Connor, 1997), organizational change process, (Stevenson &

Greenberg, 1998), dynamics of environmental movements (Campbell, 2002), sense making after tragic events (Dubnick, 2002), and symbolic meanings hidden beneath the surface in CEO letters to shareholders (Prasad & Mir, 2002).

The Sample

Taking a theoretical sampling approach, we selected the popular MBA cases in the United States and China, two countries that differ substantially in both business environment and educational systems. The U.S. sample consists of the 36 best-selling HBS cases that were used in the Ross (1998) study. They were the most frequently ordered cases from Harvard in the Spring of 1996, covered 10 categories, and 80.6% were based on field research (Ross, 1998: 52). For Chinese cases, we selected the 30 cases contained in a most current casebook, *Contemporary Teaching Cases for MBA Education* (Cheng, 1999). The choice was a compromise, as credible sales data on Chinese cases were not available. However, we consider this sample acceptable because the book was published by Tsinghua University, one of China's most prestigious universities, and the 30 cases included in the book were selected through a nationwide competition. Most of the case events took place prior to 1998, covering a wide range of business issues in enterprises that vary in size, sector, region, and ownership. Table 2 lists the category distribution of the HBS and Chinese cases.

Data Analysis

Following Ross (1998), we selected the natural paragraph, as compared to a sentence or a case, as the unit of analysis in the content analysis stage, because the meaning and perspective of a case is typically expressed in individual paragraphs. We also adopted Ross' (1988) coding guidelines, with

TABLE 2
Category Distribution of HBS Cases Versus Chinese Cases

Case Category	No. HBS Cases	HBS Cases (%)	No. Chinese Cases	Chinese Cases (%)
Marketing	10	27.8	5	16.7
Human Resource Management/Organizational Behavior/General Management/Service Management	18	50.0	12	40.0
Strategy	4	11.1	7	23.3
Finance/Accounting/MIS/Operation	4	11.1	6	20.0
Total	36	100.0	30	100.0

Note. A summary table of the HBS and Chinese cases studied is available from the authors upon request.

minor adjustments for the Chinese context. Using the keywords listed in Table 3 as coding guidelines, we coded each paragraph based on its respective domain(s). If more than one perspective was noted in a paragraph, the multiple categories present would be recorded accordingly. Since one paragraph can be coded into multiple categories, the total percentages of the four categories recorded could be greater than 100%.

We followed the Ross (1998) coding procedure in general, with one major modification. Instead of relying on Ross' (1998) single-rater approach, the two of us conducted the coding jointly, but on the basis of separate work. Our two-phase coding process began with a pilot study in which we each coded three sample Chinese cases, compared results, and discussed the divergences and clarified the coding categories. We then each proceeded to code the rest of the Chinese cases independently, while maintaining frequent communications on any ambiguities encountered. Initial interrater agreement was 76%. After all the cases had been coded, the two sets of coding results were again compared and differences ironed out.

Upon the recommendation of an anonymous reviewer of this journal, we took further measures in the revision process to ensure comparability of the Ross (1998) coding of U.S. cases and our coding of the Chinese cases. We obtained from Dr. Ross the coding records of her 1998 study of HBS cases, carefully studied all the coding examples in her dissertation, and then coded two of the HBS cases by ourselves. We selected one of the most one-dimensional cases—the case of Dustin Brass, in which 85% of the paragraphs were coded "R" and 15% were coded "R and H," and one of the most multidimensional cases, Donna Dubinsky and Apple Computer, where all the four domains were present and many paragraphs had multiple perspectives. We then compared our coding results with those of Dr. Ross. Although the two sets of results were very similar, we did identify one difference. In the H domain, Ross (1998) appeared to have used an interpretation that was broader than ours (for example, any discussion of a person without mentioning his or her official position was coded H by Dr. Ross). After identifying this differ-

TABLE 3
Keywords of Organizational Domain

Rational	Human	Political	Symbolic
Analysis	Appreciation	Bargaining	Belief
Bureaucratic structure	Aspiration	Coalition	Commitment
Chain of control	Attitude	Conflict	Culture
Compensation	Competency	Diversity of interests	Climate
Consistent	Creativity	Fairness	Drama
Efficiency	Desire	Gray area of unstated authority	Ethics
Facts	<i>Guanxi</i> (social connection)	Influence	Euphemisms
Formalization	Emotion	Inner circle	Faith
Functional work units	Expectation	Jockeying	Habit
Goal specification	Experience	Legal action/reaction	Humor
Guide	Face (<i>mianzi</i>)	Negotiation	Ideals
Logic/Logical path	Feelings	Nuance	Interpretation
Measurement	Individual behavior	Party activities	Kinship ties
Mechanical	Informal groups	Political ideology	Meanings
Model	Interpersonal skills	Political climate	Metaphors
Order	Intuition	Policies	Moral
Optimization	Loyalty	Power	Myth/stories
Precision	Motivate	Public opinion	Norm
Prediction	Personality	Rumor	Philosophy
Procedure	Personal relationships	Social responsibility	Play
Regulations/Rules	Recognition	Trade-offs	Reputation
Routine scientific	Skills	Threats	Ritual/ceremony
decision-making	Teams		Rites
process	Team spirit		Gala
Sequential technologies	Training		Value
Information standards			Vision
			Tacit knowledge
			Tradition
			Spirituality

Note. Adapted from Ross (1998).

ence, we adjusted our "H" coding definition, and recoded all Chinese cases accordingly.

After coding all Chinese cases, we analyzed the narratives of both the Chinese and HBS cases. In the coding phase, our focus was the paragraph. In the narrative analysis, we read all the cases in their entirety. We examined their narrative patterns by asking: "Who is the narrator, and from whose perspective is the story told?" We also examined the structure of the narrative, that is, how the case story is told. Is the case structured as a pending crisis that demands an immediate decision, or as an account of past events to be interpreted? Is the case centered on a single issue, or is the focal issue intertwined with other problems facing the case protagonist? Does case information come preprocessed, with "irrelevant" information edited out, or does it come in bits and pieces, amidst the streams of hectic activities in the life of the busy executive? These are all important, as they may convey to MBA students an implicit model of how organizations function and how executives actually work.

After all the paragraphs were coded and all the narrative patterns analyzed, we then proceeded to search cross-case patterns and themes (Eisenhardt, 1989). We read the 66 cases over and over, jotting down any unique or unusual points on the margin, and writing on their respective case cover pages the key issues discussed and the overall framework of the case. Once we identified a tentative pattern in a few cases, we went over the entire case portfolio to see if it was indeed a feature shared by many other cases. In some instances, the pattern presented itself by its repeated presence in most cases. For example, the dominant pattern of a "decision-oriented" case was easy to spot. Many of both the Chinese and HBS samples began with a description of an executive facing a problem, followed by industry-, company-, and task-specific information, and ended by saying that it was time to make a decision. In other instances, patterns

were more subtle and less visible; we became aware of them only after having encountered an exception that highlighted their absence. For example, it was after reading the statements in the Lincoln Electric case that *defended employees*, unlike other cases did, that we began to realize that the pattern in most cases was to portray top managers in a positive light.

After tentative cross-case patterns were identified, we went back to the literature for interpretations. We compared these patterns with a wide spectrum of theories by asking, "What is this similar to? What does it contradict? And why?" (Eisenhardt, 1989). In making such constant comparisons, we relied on the writings of leading scholars in the field of organization theory and decision making contained in two edited volumes (Williamson, 1990; Zey, 1992). We also surveyed the findings of extant studies on MBA curricula and management education. The findings reported below are the result of this iterative process.

FINDINGS

Below we first present the overall coding results of the Chinese cases juxtaposed with the HBS cases coded by Ross (1998). Next, we discuss the five salient patterns that are common to the majority of HBS and Chinese cases: (1) rationalistic framework, (2) undersocialized protagonist, (3) strategy-driven organization, (4) manager-as-analyst, and (5) naïve and biased politics.

Overall Balance

Table 4 presents the coding results in the four domains. The first two columns are the coding results of Ross (1998), dividing HBS cases into those written prior to 1987 and after. The third column contains the coding results of the Chinese cases.

As Table 4 shows, although organizations are simultaneously rational, human, political, and

TABLE 4
Coding Results of HBS Cases and Chinese Cases

Coding Category	HBS Cases Prior to 1987	HBS Cases After 1987	Chinese Cases (1999)
R	96%	97%	76%
H	57%	48%	31%
P	3%	5%	28%
S	8%	10%	8%
No. of units	1501	1370	1659
Average Units/Case	79 (19 cases)	81 (17 cases)	55 (30 cases)

Note. HBS case coding results are taken from Ross (1998).

symbolic, the rational perspective is the dominant framework adopted by both Chinese and American case writers. Using the case paragraph as our measure unit (a chart, a table, or an exhibit is usually treated as a paragraph), R domain perspective is present in 76% of the Chinese case contents, and in 97% of the HBS case contents. No other perspective is covered as extensively or in as much detail as the R domain, or the rational perspective. As noted by Ross (1998), Harvard initiated a major effort in 1986 to rectify the overemphasis on the rational domain. Despite that attempt, R-domain emphasis remains high in the HBS cases written after 1987. The same dominance of the R domain is also observed in the Chinese cases. In contrast, the S domain, or symbolic perspective, is the least developed in both the Chinese and HBS cases, accounting for no more than 10% and 5% of their contents, respectively. Judging from the coding results, it appears that the overall perspective of teaching cases is unbalanced, with the rational domain dominating over all others.

There are interesting differences between the Chinese and HBS cases too: The Chinese cases have a bigger "P" content (28% in contrast with 5% in HBS cases), while the HBS cases a greater "H" content (57; 48% vs. 31% in Chinese cases). Detailed readings of the cases reveal that the HBS cases have a higher "H" percentage mainly because most U.S. businesses are started by individual entrepreneurs, and HBS cases usually offer detailed descriptions of the founding entrepreneurs, much of which falls within the human domain. Furthermore, quite a few HBS cases also include product advertisements in the exhibits (none of the Chinese cases does so), many of which appeal to the emotions and other noneconomic incentives of consumers, which, again, belong to the H domain. Many Chinese enterprises, on the contrary, are established by the government, and the descriptions of a company's histories are often loaded with "P" domain information, such as the government policy that has led to the creation of that particular company. In addition, the Chinese government has a bigger involvement in the conduct of business. The higher ratio of "P" domain contents in the Chinese cases can also be attributed to the fact that many Chinese cases deal with joint ventures, where conflicts among the top management team are a generally accepted topic and are thus discussed openly. Conflicts within the top management team in most other cases, where ownership structures are nonjoint ventures, are carefully avoided (to be discussed further later).

Ross (1998) found most HBS cases "executive-centric"; that is, written almost exclusively from

the perspective of a senior executive. Although many Chinese cases shared the same feature, a substantial subgroup (8 cases) exhibits a very different perspective. These are instead written in an executive-free fashion; the decision maker that is so central to most HBS cases is simply nonexistent here. In the absence of a personalized narrator, these cases usually start with an impersonal review of the company history, and discuss the focal problem from the perspective of an outside observer. Such a way of case presenting often leaves the readers with an impression that the firm is a product of history and its managers mere passers-by. Organizational survival is a matter of environmental selection, rather than proactive adaptation on the part of the organizations (Hannan & Freeman, 1984). This is in sharp contrast to the dominant pattern of a "strategy-driven" organization (to be discussed later). Interestingly enough, all 8 Chinese cases pertain to state-owned enterprises.

We next discuss the five patterns that are more or less common to the majority of Chinese and HBS cases. A caveat is in order. As the 66 cases are written by many writers and for different teaching objectives, the five patterns described below do not necessarily apply to all cases. We discuss both the prevailing patterns and the exceptions. If a pattern is common to both HBS and Chinese cases and can be illustrated with one example, we select the Chinese sample so that *AMLE* readers can have a flavor of Chinese cases.

Rationalistic

Despite the presence of multiple perspectives in almost any single case, the primary framework of most cases is basically invariably rational. We can see this clearly in the opening and concluding paragraphs, where the primary case question is presented. A typical case begins with an overview that is predominantly rational, framing the issue as how to achieve organizational goals in the face of adverse environmental change, then proceeds to present necessary market and company information, and ends with the decision to be made. For example, the Chinese case Xinlin Group is structured with the following overview at the beginning:

Although Xinlin Group has survived the downturn, the road ahead is still full of uncertainties. The Asian financial crises have depressed demand in domestic and southeastern Asian market, and several foreign competitors have established a beachhead in China and are expanding fast . . . How to com-

pete with these multinational firms is the major problem facing Xinlin.

The case then reviews the company history, market trend, strategies of major competitors, internal strengths and weaknesses, and various options under consideration. The case ends by calling for a strategic decision:

The most critical of all now is to develop a three year plan, because each of the alternatives being considered—whether it is to set up a joint venture, to take out more loans, to expand into Asian markets, or to compete with the foreign companies in the domestic market, will lead the company down to a very different path. With competition intensifying with each passing day, Xinlin has to decide on its strategic direction (189, 196).

Consistent with this “strategy–environment fit” framework, most cases provide the readers with detailed data in exhibits that contain mostly rational contents. This combined HBS and Chinese sample of 66 cases contains 533 exhibits (355 in HBS cases, and 178 in Chinese cases), 84.8% of which (264 in the HBS cases and 168 in the Chinese cases) fall in the R domain. Typical of these are product descriptions, financial statements, sales trends reports, market share of the competitors, and so forth. Exhibits pertaining to the other three domains (H, P, and S) combined account for less than 16% of the exhibits.

In contrast to the detailed data of the rational domain, discussions of the human, political, and symbolic elements are much less developed. Topics such as feelings and emotions (the human domain), power and conflicts (the political domain), ceremonies and rituals, identity and meanings, perceptions and values (the symbolic domain) are generally underrepresented. Even when and where nonrational domain issues are raised, their coverage is usually inadequate and sometimes superficial. In the human domain, for example, employees are often referred to as statistics: “[T]he company now has 5400 employees, among them 2800 are production line workers, and 880 are engineers and technicians” (Chinese case: Shengyang Ventilation Equipment Company: 21).

Notable exceptions to this pattern are cases in the OB–HRM category. Cases here tend to present the issue in more a holistic light and frame the issue as the need to harmonize human and organizational needs. For example:

My job, as I see it, is to motivate people to do what I think fits in the overall plan. . . . The process is essentially an art. It involves finding out the grain of the situation and then going with it, not against it. It is much like sailing, which I enjoy very much. When I go sailing, I go with the wind. To achieve my goal, I have to study the situation, set sails, and to go with the wind and the water. It is much the same in management (HBS case: Renn Zaphiropoulos: 2).

Undersocialized

Consistent with the first pattern that frames the focal issue as how to devise a strategy consonant with the environment, the second pattern found in the majority of the cases is to treat organizations as a mere tool for profits, while neglecting their social nature.

As Selznick (1948) pointed out, “the most important thing about organizations is that, although they are tools, each nevertheless has a life of its own” (1948: 10). The structure of an organization can only be understood by understanding the motives, desire, and actions of the people in that structure and the attendant responses to those actions (Perrow, 1979). No matter how detailed the job descriptions are, the formal structures can “never succeed in conquering the non-rational dimensions of organizational behavior” (Selznick, 1948: 25). Akerlof (1984: 80) summarized the reality of organizational life as “a complex equilibrium in which official work rules are partially enforced, existing side by side with a set of customs in the workplace which are at partial variance with the work rules.” We found this human side of organizational reality underrepresented in most cases.

While the formal structure of the organization is featured prominently in most teaching cases, the informal aspect is seldom mentioned. Among the 66 cases we studied, 27 (11 Chinese cases and 16 HBS cases) come with organizational charts, but only one case explicitly mentions the existence of the informal organization:

There is another person who is not a member of the firm but has just as significant an influence as the seven founding members. He is Ou Zhiwei, general manager of Guangzhou Tianliang advertising agency. Ou not only designed the entire company identity system (CIS) program for Huadi but also created ‘Huadi’, the name of the company (Chinese case: Guangdong Huadi Group Corporation: 98).

Similarly, family members and social relations of executives are largely left out. Only a few cases pay passing attention to children of executives. The Wal-Mart case mentions in one sentence that "with four children, Sam Walton was the richest person at that time . . ." In the Southwest Airlines case, it is again one sentence mentioning that managers sent birthday cards to the children of employees.

There is also a general tendency to ignore the shaping effects of the larger institutional context on individual behavior. Numerous studies have documented that the anonymous market of the neoclassical model is virtually nonexistent in economic life and that transactions of all kinds are rife with social connections. One of the best-documented facts in the sociological study of business is that business relations spill over into sociability and vice versa, and this is especially true among business elites (Granovetter, 1985; Useem, 1970). Top executives of the competing firms may know each other. "They may sit together on government or trade committees. They may know each other socially and even belong to the same country club" (Macaulay, 1963: 63). The implication is that their attempts at purposive actions are embedded in concrete, ongoing systems of social relations and are not free of noneconomic considerations (Powell, 1992), and the social network of the executives is a critical factor in their managerial effectiveness.

Except in the company history part where the start-up of the company is described, there is virtually no mention of the social relationships and networks of the executives. The HBS case Singapore TradeNet is an exception. It attributes much of the success of TradeNet to the social networks between key executives in the project. One key executive is quoted saying:

Phillip and I knew each other well. The small size of our country makes it possible for key people to get to know one another. In fact, people often hold a number of key positions in different agencies through their careers. . . . We both understood the problems . . . (p. 4).

Also underrepresented in most cases are nonmaterialistic incentives. Barnard (1938) argued that the most important incentives in organizations were those of "a personal, non-materialistic character" (1938: 123), including "the opportunities for distinction, prestige, personal power, and the attainment of dominating position . . . [and] ideal benefactions [such as] pride of workmanship, sense of adequacy, altruistic service for family or

others" (1938: 143). Yet nonmaterialistic incentives are ignored in the majority of the cases we studied. For example, few cases mention personal ambition of executives, although it is well documented to be a key driver in organizational life (Shen & Cannella, 2002).

One way to appreciate how much the majority of the cases underrepresent the social aspect of organizations is to look at some exceptions. One HBS case describes the importance of social motivation this way:

People are very concerned with their image in the eyes of others. Therefore, in relating with people, the statements that are made are often meaningless. What is important is what they imply about a person's self-esteem. I spend a fair amount of my time trying to reduce contempt in the organization. It's absolutely deadly. Not conflict, but contempt. . . . Marketing, engineering, and production people often don't understand one another. It is not unlike the Jews and the Arabs. The key here is to build each group's esteem in the eyes of the other group (HBS case, Renn Zaphiropoulos: 2).

A few other HBS cases also discuss the social meaning and implications of work. In one case, the protagonist is described as caring more for the work than for the business: "I am a doctor first and entrepreneur second" (HBS case: Shouldice Hospital: 11). Several other HBS cases, such as Johnson and Johnson: Philosophy and Culture, Southwest Airlines, People's Express, and Mrs. Fields' Cookies also discuss the importance of social motivations. But by and large, the social dimension is underdeveloped in the majority of the cases.

Strategy-Driven

A third pattern is the tendency in many cases to focus on strategic decisions at the top of the organization. In a well-articulated discussion of the case method, two Harvard business school professors, Dooley and Skinner, delineate eight types of cases in terms of their educational objectives (1977: 286). Only two refer to action, and none of the eight specifies decision making per se. All eight types are considered important for management education. However, for reasons yet to be explored, the case method appears to have evolved in such a way that a decision focus in general, and strategy focus in particular, is now considered by many to be "ideal." In fact, "a clear decision focus" is now considered one of the key criteria for publication

by most case research associations and their journals (Lundberg, Rainsford, Shay, & Young, 2001).

This decision focus is evident in our sample. The majority of both Chinese and HBS cases are centered on a strategic decision at the top. Among the 66 cases, 39 (16 Chinese and 23 HBS cases) regard strategy formulation as their primary focus. Major decisions discussed in the sample include: marketing strategy, mergers and acquisition, personnel choice, competitive strategy, corporate strategy, financing strategy, diversification, pricing strategy, launch of a new product, quality assurance, new product marketing strategy, promotion strategy, global strategy, information system strategy, and so forth. In terms of time frame, these cases often start from a point that is just hours (sometimes one or two days) before a major decision has to be made. The following examples are typical:

Lotus Development Corporation's director of sales operations, John Shagoury . . . was preoccupied with a major decision facing his young company—whether Lotus should bypass its distributors and dealers and have its own sales force sell directly to its large corporate users . . .

In an industry that had often extracted a fatal price for strategic errors, Shagoury knew that Lotus had to announce its decision soon. Procrastination—just as much as a poor decision—could cost Lotus its market leadership (HBS case: Lotus Development Corporation: 1, 12).

At the board meeting, Mr. Li Zhi was asked to develop a marketing strategy. . . . In the last few years, because of the millions of dollars that foreign-based multinational firms have poured into their marketing effort in China and the rampant flood of films smuggled in from abroad, Le Kai Film's market share has declined from 35% in 1991 to 19% of 1996. The company's very survival is now at stake. . . . (Chinese case: The Le Kai Film Corporation: 149).

After carefully considering various factors, Mr. Gu Hua knew he had to develop a plan. . . . Gu recalled his strategy advisor, Professor Lan's warning, "If your decision is wrong, you may destroy the entire enterprise (Chinese case: Huabao Air Conditioner: 163).

Strategy is of course important. But with so many cases depicting strategic decisions in the "life or death" fashion as we saw above, an implicit notion

may be conveyed to the readers that organizations are driven by strategies at the top, and that the most important responsibility of executives is to make big decisions. Simon differentiated *design* (a heuristic search process to develop alternatives) from *decision making* (the evaluation of and choosing from among the alternatives), and stated that "the design . . . is often a central concern . . . marketing procedures, manufacturing procedures, pricing policies, the central organization structure, even long-term strategies are designed, and not just chosen. One cannot choose the best, one cannot even satisfy, until one has alternatives to choose from" (quoted in Augier & Sarasvathy, 2003: 7). After months of observing senior managers on the job, Kotter (1982) reported that executives rarely "made" decisions. Instead, decisions emerge from a fluid, even chaotic pattern of conversations, meetings, and memos.

Contrasting the above pattern of "direction from the top" with the Transformation at Ford case, what is missing in the former becomes quite clear. After describing what has happened at Ford, the case writer states, "the view that there was no master plan was widely held by Ford Management." Executives are quoted saying,

After it happened, even the participants asked: "How did it start?" Ours was certainly not a top-down effort. The first real change happened in the plants. . . . The point here isn't to disparage or to discredit top management. Rather, I believe that the most profound and lasting change occurs when the rank and file want it so badly that *they* take the initiative and manage upward (HBS case: Transformation at Ford: 5; *italics original*).

Mintzberg (1996) criticizes the common practice of asking MBA students to play the role of the great strategist atop the institution they know little about, pointing out that this may instill an illusion that the entire organization can be reduced to a single strategist, usually the chief at the top. Overemphasizing strategy formulation at the expense of organization building may encourage MBA students to look for silver bullets, instead of making the hard effort of effecting tiny improvements at a thousand places throughout the organization.

Manager-As-Analyst

It is well documented that managers are not systematic, analytical thinkers. They wear many hats, juggling many projects at any given time, working at a hectic pace, shifting rapidly from one task to

another, and spending very little managerial time on planning and analysis (Mintzberg, 1971). But the picture presented in the majority of MBA cases is quite different. This brings us to the fourth pattern, that is, the tendency to present problem solving as an intellectual exercise and to portray the manager as an analyst, focusing on a single issue at a time, detached from daily operations, and free of unwanted interruptions.

Many cases begin with a "quiet scene," depicting a key individual, usually a senior executive, pondering over a problem in the executive suite. The following examples are typical:

In a sunset evening of 1997 summer, Mr. Niu Gang, CEO of Dashang Group sat quietly, as usual, in his simple but elegant antique-styled office, pondering over the series of problems that had been bothering him in recent days (Chinese case: Dashang Group: 91).

Robert Minicucci, vice president of the Engineered Products Division of Cumberland Metal Industries (CMI), and Thomas Simpson, group manager of the Mechanical Products Group, had spent the entire Wednesday reviewing a new product CMI was about to introduce. The room was silent, and as he watched the waning rays of the sun filtering through the window, Minicucci pondered all that had been said (HBS case: Cumberland Metal Industries: Engineered Products Division, 1980: 91).

Consistent with such "quietly pondering" scenes, most cases are well focused and clearly structured. They center on a single issue, progressing from initial introduction to general information, then to task-specific data, and finally to the decisions to be made. Other problems in the organization and other responsibilities of the executive are conveniently left out, as if the focal issue is independent from other issues, and it is the only issue for the executive to deal with at the moment.

In real life, almost every executive wears more than one hat, and role conflicts are common. To focus on one issue at a time is almost an impossible luxury. As Cohen, March, and Olsen (1972) argued in the Garbage Can model, organizational decision making is an arena for many functions, some task-related and others not. Only when one understands all the activities going on in an executive's life can one truly understand a particular decision the executive makes.

An exception to this "single-issue focus, manager-as-analyst" pattern is an offbeat format that

mimics the chaotic and hectic managerial life, against which an executive makes decisions. This Tong Lian case (a Chinese case) has a general focus on the company's expansion into the insurance business in another city. The opening section of the case does not offer an overview of the problem at hand, as most other cases do; instead, it simply lists the names of the 20 people that will later appear in the case. Structured in a semidiary format, the case records the protagonist's management activities over a 6-month period, during which he juggled multiple projects. His efforts to meet the profit and sales target were intrinsically tangled with other issues, such as retaining the confidence of his subordinates, managing the organizational politics inside a key client firm, competing for parent corporation resources, and building consensus among engineering, production, and sales groups in a highly uncertain environment. Instead of providing case data in the familiar preprocessed blocks with headings such as Company Background, Product Market, and Competition, this Tong Lian case recounts the process of how and when information reaches the decision maker, thus capturing the messy and oftentimes chaotic characteristics of organizational life as well as the interactive nature of managerial work.

Strategy making in this case is not a momentary, analytical choice, but the outcome of a complex, interactive social process that extends over a considerable period of time. The challenge in this case is not the making of a "big decision" based on brilliant analyses; rather, it is how to mobilize a complex organization and handle the countless miniproblems in real time. As the project progressed, various problems unfolded; Mr. Li, the branch director, had to make adjustments to prevent and respond to crises. For example, one of the episodes described in the case is an unexpected minicrisis: "Just as Li was about to finish reading the telephone message notes, an employee burst into his office, charging toward his desk and screamed, 'Mr. Li, this is really way out of the line! I have to talk to you, now!'"

Unlike most other cases, this one is not written from the perspective of one single protagonist. Three role-play scenarios are inserted, which require the reader to step into the shoes of other key players and adopt their viewpoints. The whole case is written more like the script of a multiactor drama than the monologue of a single protagonist. Partially due to this multiple-narrator format, the case replays the ambiguity that executives often face, which may help MBA students appreciate the difficulty of "sense making" amidst a bewildering range of conflicting signals in real life.

A few other HBS cases also make explicit reference to the pressure from juggling multiple projects, and the "action-bias" nature of managerial work:

I wish I could thoroughly research the market, but that's not possible. . . . It is imperative that I make a quick decision. After all, I have other products to manage and my boss has the entire biocide business to manage (HBS case: Rohm & Haas: 8).

Planning and analysis were luxuries . . . as Apple grew. Dubinsky recalled: "I might also mention what was not done: analytical overkill. . . . No time for analysis." (HBS case: Donna Dubinsky and Apple Computer: 6).

If you want numbers, keep them to yourself. We don't want them . . . (HBS case: Johnson and Johnson: Philosophy & Culture: 12).

Unfortunately, only a handful of cases in our pool of 66 capture the "garbage can" characteristic of organizational life, while the "manager-as-analyst" tone is a common feature for many cases.

Naïve Politics

Although the intensity and scope of organization politics vary, they exist in virtually all organizations (Sussman et al., 2002). It is well known that the top management team seldom functions as a "team" (Hambrick, 1994), and politics and conflicts are not uncommon in the executive suite. Senior executives are ambitious individuals with high needs for power and achievement (McClelland & Burnham, 1976). Those second in line have a strong desire to "run their own show," while the incumbent CEOs have a strong incentive to hang on to their jobs (Sonnenfeld, 1988). Even in seemingly innocent technical decisions such as new product development, political games play an important role (Maute & Locander, 1994).

Given the above, teaching cases should adequately prepare future managers for managing the politics of business. Most cases, however, fall short on this dimension. The fifth pattern we identified is that most cases tend to depict an organizational environment as "politics-free." Internal conflict and power struggles are mostly missing in the HBS sample; less than 5% of the HBS case contents touch upon the political dimension. With only one exception (Donna Dubinsky and Apple Computer, see below), the HBS cases make hardly any reference to political in-fighting. Even in the one case

where the subject is brought up, it is a one-sentence remark of its absence: "There is no political in-fighting in this company" (HBS case: Renn Zaphiropoulos: 3).

Even in the Chinese sample, where 28% of the contents deal with political issues, most are devoted to governmental intervention of various kinds; with internal organizational politics largely avoided except in joint venture cases. However, the fact that most cases are inadequately developed in the political dimension does not mean they are politically neutral. Most cases are written from the perspective of a senior executive; lower level managerial staff and employees are either left out—as in 60% of the HBS cases (Ross, 1998: 91)—or portrayed as the "problem to be solved." Statements like the following are not uncommon:

Employees . . . don't have much say in operation and management, although theoretically they are the owner[s] of the firm. However, they hold a powerful force that can block any reorganization attempt (Chinese case: Northern Petroleum Products: 215).

All employees were made to feel accountable for customer satisfaction and made to act accordingly (HBS Case: Xerox Corporation: The Customer Satisfaction Program: 10).

In most cases, workers are viewed as a passive cog of the corporate money-making machine, "as an instrument of production, . . . as a resource to be exploited and monitored, as a cost to be controlled and minimized" (Aktouf, 1992: 411). The other side of the coin is that top management in most cases is portrayed in a positive light. The GE case contains an explicit statement that "[t]he new process relied much more on the judgments of a few people at the top" (HBS case: General Electric: Jack Welch's Second Wave: 4).

In most cases, the problems facing the firm come either from outside or from the lower level of the internal hierarchy, but almost never from within the executive suite. Poor performance is portrayed as a result of wrong decisions based on errors not intended by the managers, rather than a consequence of misaligned incentives and internal conflicts. To see what is left out in the teaching cases, we only need to look to recent Hollywood blockbusters on business, such as *The Firm*, *Disclosure*, and *Wall Street*, or recent corporate scandals such as those that took place at Enron and WorldCom, where the top management is precisely where the problem lies.

However, we did find three exceptions to the

above bias. The HBS case of Donna Dubinsky and Apple Computer describes the power struggle that underlies a strategy decision:

Dubinsky recognized that everybody felt confused, demoralized, and critical of the company. She saw the morale problems as fallout from the Macintosh–Apple II rivalry. During one exercise, for example, participants were asked to draw pictures that reflected their perceptions of Apple. One manager drew a picture of two men (Jobs and Sculley), both trying to steer a single boat, but one man (Sculley) appeared to be totally controlled by the other. . . . Dubinsky began to see the distribution issue as part of a much larger problem (HBS case: Donna Dubinsky and Apple Computer: 10).

The HBS case Lincoln Electric Company defends the employees by pointing out the obvious that executives are self-interest-seeking individuals just like the employees:

If those crying loudest about the inefficiencies of labor were put in the position of the wage earner, they would react as he does. The worker is not a man apart. He has the same needs, aspirations, and reactions as the industrialist. A worker will not cooperate on any program that will penalize him. Does any manager?

The industrial manager is very conscious of his company's need of uninterrupted income. He is completely oblivious, though, to the worker's same need. Management fails—i.e., profits fall off—and gets no punishment. The wage earner does not fail but is fired. Such injustice! (HBS case: Lincoln Electric Company: 23).

The Chinese case of Zhicheng Group describes an ownership dispute between Zhicheng's founder and chairman and its hired CEO. In the high-growth years, Zhicheng group went through many mergers, acquisitions, and spin-offs. The CEO performed exceptionally well and was subsequently awarded the control of one of Zhicheng's group companies, the ownership of which was disputed in the case. The chairman sued the CEO for secretly channeling parent company assets into this subsidiary company and illegally claiming the latter's ownership. The CEO countersued the chairman for fraud, pointing to the fact that although the chairman provided the initial capital to get the disputed company started, as Chinese regulations

require that a certain amount of capital be invested before a company can be registered, he had subsequently withdrawn virtually all the capital shortly after the registration process was completed. The CEO had to run the company almost entirely with the funds he raised by himself, thus was entitled of its ownership. Obviously; the top management is cast in a very different light in cases like this than in those "strategy driven" cases. Ironically, the name of the company, Zhicheng, means "utmost honesty" in Chinese.

DISCUSSION

The above analyses suggest that the rational perspective dominates the majority of teaching cases. Cases tend to emphasize reasons over emotions, economics over politics, material benefits over intangibles and meanings, and strategy formulation over organization building.

Some readers may argue that perhaps the emphasis on rationality is intentional and even necessary, given human's distinct lack of it. This argument is indeed appealing. However, it begs the question of whether we can make human beings behave more rationally by describing a reality more rational than it truly is. Obviously, that question goes beyond the limited objective of this research. Our assumption is that no matter how effective management education can be, the nonrational aspects of the business world are probably not going to disappear any time soon. If that is the case, depicting a reality more rational than it is may well be counterproductive.

The stated purpose of adopting the case method is to bring "a chunk of reality" into the classroom so that students can learn how to solve complex problems in the real world. Through the case method, students do not just pick up the tools for the business world, they also develop mental models of that world. Since reality is socially constructed, and media presentations can have a profound impact on people's perception of reality (Gamson, Croteau, & Hoynes, 1992), the rationalistic (and thus simplistic) reality depicted in MBA teaching cases may potentially have a negative impact on students' effectiveness as future managers. If students see a distorted picture, they are likely to react in the wrong way.

Take organizational politics for example. Although politics may have a negative connotation, managers must know the political landscape of their organizations to be effective. In fact, "an accurate perception of the power distribution . . . is . . . a necessary prerequisite for the man seeking powerful support for his demands" (Pettigrew,

1973: 240). However, the tendency to depict organizational environment as "politics-free" in the majority of the teaching cases may have impeded students' learning of political skills. It is not a mere coincidence that a recent *BusinessWeek* survey of 1500 MBA graduates from the Top-30 business schools reported that "perhaps the loudest complaint was about just how ill-prepared alums felt when faced with the politics and challenges of managing in the middle" (Merritt & Hazelwood, 2003: 94).

Take strategy formation for another example. Since March and Simon's (1958) critique on the rational-choice model, many scholars have questioned whether strategies originate from decisions at all (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985), and whether strategies so generated led to better outcomes (Quinn, 1980). However, if the majority of the teaching cases depict a picture of strategies being "planned" at the top, students probably will approach strategy formulation more as planning, and neglect the alternative of "emergent" strategies as documented in Pettigrew (1990), Quinn (1980), and Mintzberg and Waters (1985). Similarly, MBA graduates' well-known weakness in interpersonal skills may also be related to the deficiency of the majority of teaching cases in depicting the social aspect of organizations.

The shortcomings of many of the above-identified biases are well known (Mintzberg 1996). Why do they remain uncorrected in teaching cases? Many factors may be at work. For one thing, this may have to do with the fact that the "rational choice" framework is, up to now, much more developed than any known alternatives. Herrnstein (1990) argues that "rational choice fails as description of actual behavior; it remains unequaled as a theory" (cited in Zey, 1992: 2). Case writers may need to have much more exposure to and understanding of the alternatives before they can furnish cases with more balanced perspectives.

Another reason may lie in the case-writing procedures. Both the HBS Instruction to Case Writers and professional norms in field studies require that all cases be approved by the management of the focal company before their publication. What is seen as unfavorable to the company or to its top management is likely to be edited out either by the company, or by the case writers themselves through their self-imposed censorship.

A third reason for the persistence of the rationalistic biases in MBA cases might relate to the vested interests of the business school system itself. The sociology of professions posits that occupations and professions are competing with each other for domination over contested territories and that win-

ning comes through societal support for a profession's claim that it offers the most promising tools and solutions to the underlying problems (Abbott, 1988). Education is a system of job allocation, which legitimately and authoritatively places individuals into valued and less-valued positions in a society (Meyer, 1982). Because MBA students come to business school essentially for a better job (Rynes & Trank, 1999), it is only natural for business schools as a profession to emphasize the rational aspect of business, which in turn makes the analytical tools that business schools teach valuable in the job market, and to downplay the importance of valuable but nonteachable factors such as being "street smart" or being born in an upper-class family (Useem & Karabel, 1986). From this perspective, it is no surprise that the entertainment industry and the news media focus on the "dark side" of the business (Paltrow, 2002), and the business schools on the "rational" side.

As March and Shapiro commented, "advice-providers typically exaggerate the value of their advice, and information providers typically exaggerate the value of their information. It would be remarkable if they did not" (1992: 281). MBA cases are not written for research purposes, as in medicine or law, but as teaching vehicles to sell management education to the business community. Consequently, there is a built-in incentive for business schools to project a more rational image, where organizations are driven by strategies, decisions based on rational analyses, and top management the master of the universe and "in-control." Otherwise, if survival is essentially the result of environmental selection as suggested by the organizational ecology perspective, why should executives purchase business education?

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

We studied in this research the content meanings, both manifest and latent, of popular MBA cases used in the United States and China. The findings suggest that there exists a major gap between the stated purpose of the case method of bringing "a chunk of reality" into classroom and what teaching cases actually depict and convey.

By identifying the five patterns of imbalances or biases, we have suggested here some ways to develop better-balanced cases. Case writers should adopt a more balanced view of the organizational realities in teaching cases and experiment with more innovative narrative formats that can capture the complexity of the managerial work, such as the semidiary and "multiactor drama" formats observed in the Chinese case of Tong Lian.

Case writers can also supplement company-approved cases with public-domain information, such as court proceedings and investigative news reports, which will allow open discussions of otherwise politically sensitive topics. Another feasible remedy is to add a warning label to cases: "This case has been approved for publication by the company and its legal counsel." This will alert the students to note the fact that what is described in the case is the "official" version of what happened.

We noticed that cases written with a decision focus (especially those depicting a pending crisis) tend to be more rationalistic than the "descriptive" cases. The later type cases usually recount the evolution of past events that need to be made sense of but require no specific action; such cases offer richer descriptions of the complex social processes (such as Transformation at Ford, and Renn Zaphiropoulos in HBS cases). Given the current practice of many case journals' asking for cases with a decision focus, it may be necessary for case journal editors to broaden their evaluation criteria and encourage not only "decision-oriented" cases but also descriptive ones.

It is evident to us that many Chinese case writers have been imitating the HBS case styles and formats. The findings of this study suggest that Chinese case writers must be cautioned against blindly following the case writing approach of the Harvard Business School, as it may transmit implicit models that are not totally appropriate for the learning objective of MBA programs.

For case instructors, this research raises the difficult question of what can they do about the imbalances and biases in extant cases already in use. One possible remedy is to select a case set for their courses that is as balanced as possible. A more practical approach is to bring up the missing dimensions in class discussion. For example, case instructors can ask students to consider the political implications of their strategy recommendations. They can also remind students that the protagonist in the case under discussion has many responsibilities and can afford to devote only limited time to any given problem.

Limitations of this research should also be noted. In addition to the common problems with the qualitative research method, this study might also suffer from the sampling bias. The thirty Chinese sample cases are not necessarily the best sellers; some of the biases identified above might be attributable to the biases of the particular casebook editors, rather than a prevailing mind-set common to most Chinese cases writers. Second, our analyses on the Chinese cases are based on the teaching cases only, (teaching notes about

these cases are not available). Future study should include both teaching cases and the accompanying teaching notes.

Several extensions are possible. By comparing Chinese cases written in the current period with those written in the early 1980s, we may identify and measure the influence that Western management theories have effected on Chinese management education. A more interesting possibility is to juxtapose the "business reality" presented in best-selling MBA cases with what is portrayed in award-winning movies, novels, and news stories. Such a comparison between the image projected by the management education profession and that depicted by the entertainment industry and news media might reveal important blind spots in our understanding of the business world, and therefore, help us develop more effective ways to educate future managers.

REFERENCES

- Abbott, A. 1988. *The system of professions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Akerlof, G. A. 1984. Gift exchange and efficiency-wage theory: Four views. *American Economic Review*, 74(2): 79-83.
- Aktouf, O. 1992. Management and theories of organizations in the 1990s: Toward a critical radical humanism? *Academy of Management Review*, 17(3): 407-431.
- Augier, M., & Sarasvathy, S. D. 2003. Management as a science of the artificial. Paper presented at the *Academy of Management Annual Conference, 2003*, Seattle, USA. Aug. 7-11.
- Banning, K. 2003. The effect of the case method on tolerance for ambiguity. *Journal of Management Education*, 27(5): 556-568.
- Barnard, C. I. 1938. *The theory of authority. The functions of the executive*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Barry, D., & Elmes, M. 1997. Strategy retold: Toward a narrative view of strategic discourse. *Academy of Management Review*, 22(2): 429-452.
- Bergquist, W. H. 1992. *The four cultures of the academy: Insights and strategies for improving leadership in collegiate organizations*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Bolman, L., & Deal, T. 2003. *Reframing organizations* (3rd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Bruner, E. M. 1984. The opening up of anthropology. In E. M. Bruner, (Ed.), *Text, play, and story: The construction and reconstruction of self and society*: 1-18. Washington, DC: The American Ethnological Society.
- Campbell, R. 2002. A narrative analysis of success and failure in environmental remediation: The case of incineration at the Sydney Tar Ponds. *Organization & Environment*, Sept. 15(3): 259-277.
- Cheng, S., (Ed.). 1999. *Contemporary teaching cases for MBA education*. Beijing: Minzhu yu Jianshe Press.
- Cohen, M. D., March, J. G., & Olsen, J. P. 1972. A garbage can model of organizational choice. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 17: 1-25.

- Denzin, N. K. 1989. *Interpretive biography*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Dooley, A. R. & Skinner, W. 1977. Casing casemethod methods. *Academy of Management Review*, 2(2): 277-289.
- Dubnick, M. 2002. Postscripts for a "state of war": Public administration and Civil liberties after September 11. *Public Administration Review* 62 (Special Issue).
- Dunford, R. W. 1992. *Organizational behavior: An organizational analysis perspective*. Sydney: Addison-Wesley.
- Dunford, R. W., & Palmer, I. C. 1995. Claims about frames: Practitioners' assessment of the utility of reframing. *Journal of Management Education*, 19: 96-195.
- Eisenhardt, K. M. 1989. Building theories from case study research. *Academy of Management Review*, 14(4): 532-550.
- Erskine, J. A., Leenders, M. R., & Mauffette-Leenders, L. R. 1981. *Teaching with cases*: 10. London, Canada: School of Business Administration, University of Western Ontario.
- Gamson, W. A., Croteau, D., & Hoynes, W. 1992. Media images and the social construction of reality. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 18: 373-393.
- Graffin, L. J. 1993. Narrative, even-structure analysis, and causal interpretation in historical sociology. *American Journal of Sociology*, 98: 1094-1133.
- Graffin, L. J. 1992. Temporality, events, and explanation in historical sociology. *Sociological Methods and Research*, 20(4): 402-427.
- Granovetter, M. 1985. Economic action and social structure: The problem of embeddedness. *American Journal of Sociology*, 91(3): 481-410.
- Hambrick, D. C. 1994. Top management groups: A conceptual integration and reconsideration of the "team" label. In B. M. Staw, & L. L. Cummings, (Eds.), *Research in organizational behavior*: (Vol. 16): 171-213. Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.
- Hannan, M. T., & Freeman, J. H. 1984. Structural inertia and organizational change. *American Sociological Review*, 49: 149-164.
- Harvard Business School. 1994. *Harvard Business School catalog of teaching materials*. Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing.
- Herrnstein, R. 1990. Rational choice theory: Necessary but not sufficient. *American Psychologist*, 45 (March): 356-367.
- Holsti, O. R. 1969. *Content analysis for the social sciences and humanities*. Reading, MA: Addison Wesley.
- Kotter, J. P. 1982. *The general managers*. New York: Free Press.
- Lawrence, P. 1953. The preparation of case material. In K. R. Andrews, (Ed.), *The case method of teaching human relations and administration*: 215. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Lundberg, C. C., Rainsford, P., Shay, J., & Young, C. A. 2001. Case writing reconsidered. *Journal of Management Education*, 25 (4): 450-463.
- Maanen, J. V., Manning, P. K., & Millier, M. L. 1989. Editor's introduction. In N. K. Denzin, (Ed.), *Interpretive biography*. Sage Publication.
- Macaulay, S. 1963. Non-contractual relations in business: A preliminary study. *American Sociological Review*, 28(1): 55-67.
- March, J. G., & Olsen, J. P. 1976. (Eds.). *Ambiguity and choice in organizations*. Bergen: Norway: Universitetsforlaget.
- March, J. G., & Shapiro, Z. 1992. Behavioral decision theory and organizational decision theory. In M. Zey, M. (Ed.), *Decision making: Alternatives to rational choice models*: 273-303. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- March, J. G., & Simon, H. A. 1958. *Organizations*. New York: John Wiley.
- Maute, M. F., & Locander, W. B. 1994. Innovation as a social-political process: An empirical analysis of influence behavior among new product managers. *Journal of Business Research*, 30: 161-174.
- McClelland, D. C., & Burnham, D. H. 1976. Power is the great motivator. *Harvard Business Review*, 54(2): 100-110.
- Merritt, J., & Hazelwood, K. 2003. What's an MBA really worth? *BusinessWeek*, Sept. 22: 90-96.
- Meyer, J. W. 1982. The effect of education as an institution. *American Journal of Sociology*, 83(1): 55-77.
- Mintzberg, H. 1971. Managerial Work: Analysis from observation. *Management Science*, 18, October.
- Mintzberg, H. 1996. Musing on management. *Harvard Business Review*, July-August.
- Mintzberg, H., & J. A. Waters, 1985. Of strategies, deliberate and emergent. *Strategic Management Journal*, 6(3): 257-272.
- O'Connor, E. S. 1997. Discourse at our disposal: Stories in and around the garbage can. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 10(4): 395-432.
- Paltrow, S. J. 2002. Dark side of the street: Why scandals continue to erupt. *Wall Street Journal*, Dec. 23.
- Perrow, C. 1979. *Complex organizations: A critical essay*. New York: Random House.
- Pettigrew, A. 1973. *The politics of organizational decision-making*. London: Harper & Row Publishers.
- Pettigrew, A. 1990. Studying strategic choice and strategic change. *Organization Studies*, 11(1): 6-11.
- Pfeffer, J. 1981. *Power in organizations*. Marshfield, MA: Pitman Publishing.
- Powell, W. 1992. The social embeddedness of getting into print. In M. Zey (Ed.), *Decision making: Alternative to rational choice models*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Powell, W., & DiMaggio, P. J. 1992. *The new institutionalism in organizational analysis*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Prasad, A., & Mir, R. 2002. Digging deep for meaning: A critical hermeneutic analysis of CEO letters to shareholders in the oil industry. *The Journal of Business Communication*, Jan. 39 (1): 92-116.
- Quinn, J. B. 1980. *Strategies for change: Logical incrementalism*. Homewood, IL: Irwin.
- Ross, K. T. 1998. *Rational, human, political and symbolic text in Harvard Business School cases: A study of structure and context*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, School of Business and Public Management, George Washington University.
- Rynes, S. L., & Trank, C. Q. 1999. Behavioral science in the business school curriculum: Teaching in a changing institutional environment. *Academy of Management Review*, 24 (4): 808-824.

- Scott, W. R. 1987. *Organizations: Rational, natural, and open systems*, (2nd ed.). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Scott, W. R. 1992. *Organizations: rational, natural and open systems*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
- Selznick, P. 1948. Foundations of the theory of organization. *American Sociology Review*, 13, February: 25–35.
- Selznick, P. 1957. *Leadership in administration: A sociological interpretation*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Shapiro, B. P. 1984. An introduction to cases. *Harvard Business School Case*: 9-584-097.
- Shen, W., & Cannella, A., Jr. 2002. Power dynamics within top management and their impacts on CEO dismissal followed by inside succession. *Academy of Management Journal*, 45(6): 1195–1208.
- Sonnenfeld, J. 1988. *The hero's farewell*, Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
- Stevenson, W. B., & Greenberg, D. N. 1998. The formal analysis of narratives of organizational change. *Journal of Management*, 24(6): 741–762.
- Sussman, L., Adams, A. J., Kuzmits, F. E., & Raho, L. E. 2002. Organizational politics: Tactics, channels, and hierarchical roles. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 40: 313–329.
- Useem, M. 1970. The social organization of the American business elite and participation of corporation directors in the governance of American institutions. *American Sociological Review*, 44: 553–572.
- Useem, M., & Karabel, J. 1986. Pathways to top corporate management. *American Sociology Review*, 51: 184–200.
- Waterman, R. H., Jr. 1990. *Advocacy: The power to change*: 41. Memphis, TN: Whittle Direct Books.
- Weick, K. 1995. *Sensemaking in organizations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Williamson, O. E. 1990. (Ed.). *Organization theory*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
- Zey, M. 1992. (Ed.). *Decision making: Alternatives to rational choice models*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Neng Liang (PhD, Indiana University, Bloomington) is professor of management and EMBA director at the China Europe International Business School. Before returning to China in 2002, he was a tenured professor at Loyola College in Maryland. He has published in the *Journal of International Business Studies* and the *European Journal of Marketing*, as well as the *Journal of Developmental Studies* and his edited book on corporate governance won a best-seller award in China in 2001. Current research interests focus on managerial decision making and CEO succession.

Jiaqian Wang earned her master's degree in Economics from China Center for Economic Research (CCER) of Beijing University and is currently a consultant with Monitor Group. She has published empirical research on the capital structure of Chinese firms, and has provided consulting service for major multinational corporations on merger and acquisition and market expansion strategies.

Copyright of Academy of Management Learning & Education is the property of Academy of Management and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.