

2013 Distinguished Scholar Interview

Written by Murad Mithani

Monday, 07 October 2013 16:33 - Last Updated Monday, 07 October 2013 16:41

At this year's Academy of Management meeting in Orlando, Edward J. Zajac received our division's Distinguished Scholar Award and delivered an engaging talk on the past, present, and future of OMT research (and his research in OMT). Ed is the James F. Bere Professor of Management & Organizations at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management. He earned his Ph.D. in Organization and Strategy from the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School (where—as we learned during his talk—he began as an Accounting PhD student!). [You can read Ed's presentation here](#)

by Murad Mithani

Murad: I want to start with the obvious question: What attracted you to academia, and why business school?

Ed: I have always enjoyed learning, and intellectual challenges always stimulated me. At the same time, I also enjoyed teaching, which I see as the sharing of knowledge. To me, a life that had this combination, where I could be in the world of ideas and the world where ideas get communicated to others and applied – well, it was the perfect blend for me. In terms of a life as an academic, I see it as beginning when you decide to enter a doctoral program, which is your commitment to a lifetime of learning. I knew I wanted such an academic life, but initially I wasn't sure what would be the subject to which I commit! My first choice, based on my undergraduate studies, was between doctoral programs in Accounting and in German literature, and I was accepted to programs in both fields. I initially enrolled in the Accounting PhD program at Wharton, but after taking first-year doctoral seminars in both accounting and management, I quickly realized that I enjoyed management topics and theories much more, and I was welcomed into the Management Department at Wharton. Looking back, I'm glad I got a strong dose of information economics my first year at Wharton – and I may be the only guy who has attended doctoral consortia in both accounting and in management!

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Murad: What were the early challenges you experienced in your career. Did any of those challenges left a lasting imprint?



Ed: I was always interested in getting a deeper understanding of the theories that I was learning. Because of my somewhat unusual background, as I mentioned earlier, I was exposed to very different theories in management, economics, and accounting. I valued the insights all these theories provided, but I also came to question the scope conditions of these theories. Once I was exposed to Merton's concept of middle-range theory, I realized that I was learning middle-range theories, and so a number of my initial publications (all beginning during my doctoral studies) focused on where a particular theory was more versus less applicable theoretically and/or contextually. I also thought that probing the limits of a theory was the best way to learn the theory more deeply and to stay intellectually open-minded. So the challenge for me remains how to simultaneously embrace a theory by exploring not only its deep roots, but also its predictive and explanatory limits and its similarities/differences with other theories. It's an opportunity as well as a challenge.

Murad: So was there ever a conscious choice in creating those linkages, or your inspiration was driven by the research questions and the collaborators you worked with?

Ed: During my years of doctoral study, I briefly (and naively) considered trying to build what I wanted to call a "trans-middle-range theory of organizations," but I came to realize that I could get the same intellectual stimulation by focusing on specific phenomena and then generating a theoretical approach to understanding these phenomena that spanned traditional theoretical boundaries. The phenomena that interested me most were interorganizational relationships, adaptation and change, and top management and board issues, and even here, I saw that these phenomena were interrelated. For example, I've written about board interlocks, the role of boards and senior managers dealing with strategic change challenges, ranging from technical and market-driven pressures to social and institutional pressures. Just as I believe that academics should not live in a world of single theories, so too do I believe that leaders of organizations shouldn't act as if they live in a world of single problems. The world of managers is one in which a lot of trade-offs and balancing needs to occur, and this idea of how to best manage competing challenges has always fascinated me. Specialization, while initially valuable, can be a liability as one seeks greater understanding – both for senior managers and senior academics!

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So, my interest in inter-organizational collaboration, strategic adaptation and change, and corporate governance were with me from the very beginning of my career. Frankly, I knew that by working on several topics, I wouldn't get bored, and I would find linkages across these topics themselves, as well as linkages and differences across major theories that usefully address these topics. For example, some of my earlier corporate governance articles, such as my first ASQ (with Randy Beatty) on incentives and monitoring in IPOs, drew upon experiences from my accounting/finance days. By the time that work appeared, I had already migrated to thinking about governance from both a micro and macro behavioral perspective (with Jim Westphal) in ASQ and elsewhere. By studying similar phenomena through multiple lenses over time, I felt my understanding growing in ways that would likely not have occurred had I stayed within a single theoretical tradition.

More recently, I've found myself in the wonderful position of having lots of folks from around the world expressing an interest in my collaborating with them on a research study. I really do enjoy the entire collaborative process with co-authors -- idea generation, theoretical positioning, and for empirical papers, sample choice, study design, et al., and I think I signal openness to collaboration and that my prior co-authors speak well of me to potential future co-authors. For my OMT Distinguished Scholar talk, I wanted to thank all my research paper co-authors, not realizing that there are over 50 folks with whom I've collaborated! I always learn from my co-authors, and when they tell me what and how they learned from me, I learn again.

Murad: It appears that the idea of multiple realities, which you discussed in your talk, has been central to your outlook towards the world.

Ed: You're right about that. I never thought that there was anything natural about or desirable about orienting yourself to a single ideological or theoretical perspective. Maybe others think that you can't hold two orientations at the same time. If I harken back to my background in German literature, I can quote Goethe in his masterpiece Faust, in which Dr. Faust bemoans the fact that "Two souls, alas, are housed within my breast." For Faust, the two souls are at odds with each other, and he is torn between them. For me, I don't feel that stress, because I believe we can simultaneously embrace alternative ideas that depict different realities and also that these can co-exist harmoniously. So, as academics we are faced with an interesting challenge: we want to be educated and expert, but too often we assume the only path to achieving this is narrow specialization. There is another path to higher (and higher) education and learning, of course, based on Renaissance ideals, which is to me inspirational and aspirational. I also think this approach keeps you intellectually flexible, an attribute that I have always highly valued. For me it goes back to my undergraduate days, when folks initially couldn't understand why I would want to study liberal arts and business at the same time. Happily, this combination led to the outcome of my being awarded a

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Fulbright scholarship for study at the University of Cologne. What the judges found interesting and original was my research topic, which was interdisciplinary (I suggested that there was an inverse correlation between the positive/negative depiction of businesspersons in modern German literature and the level of German economic prosperity). I also found another form of balance by performing as a musician throughout my years of study, including my doctoral student period. That allowed me to more fully appreciate two very different worlds at the same time. I feel like you get the most out of life this way. In fact, I think every scholar in our field should learn at least one other language and pursue some artistic form of expression as a way to spur greater open-mindedness, creativity, and overall well-being.

Murad: So what musical instruments did you play?

Primarily, I played a variety of keyboards, and secondarily, I played alto saxophone. As a doctoral student, I would work very hard from Monday to Friday, and then I'd turn into a musician for the weekend, and then come back to the academic world and be a graduate student again during the week. I found it a very healthy mental balance between two different worlds. I'm not playing music nearly as much now, but I have found a similar balance of pursuing higher levels of physical fitness through smarter exercise, nutrition, and stress reduction. It's great to be a student again! I don't think I will ever retire, but if I were to retire, my plan would be to take up music again.

Murad: From junior scholars' perspective, we often find ourselves struggling with research questions. And so I would like to know if you ever came to a point where you had to abandon a research question because it failed to make sense anymore?

In terms of dropping a research project, it happens occasionally. I always have multiple ongoing projects, and as they evolve, you start to see that some deserve to rise to the top, while others get put on the back burner and are delayed. So there is always that kind of ebb and flow. When you have a lot of research cooking, you are less likely to think about the sunk cost invested in any single project, because you are always looking forward and considering the opportunity cost of working on one project versus the other that has even higher potential.

Murad: When did you realize that you have made it? Was it the 10th publication . . . the 15th . . . 25th publication?

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Ed: Last week – when I got the OMT Distinguished Scholar Award! Seeing so many prior winners of the OMT Award at my talk – folks who I respect immensely – reminded me that I am a very, very, lucky man, and I appreciate my good fortune. When I started my career, my initial fear was that somehow the well of ideas would run dry, but then it turned out to be the problem of having more ideas than you have time to pursue. There are various markers along the research journey, in terms of publications, but I have never been interested in counting. What I like is the lasting idea, the body of work, the amazing occasions when you meet people who tell you that your article inspired their dissertations. It is a wonderful privilege to be in a position to influence how someone chooses to spend 4-5 years deepening an idea that you had. Increasingly, I find myself looking to help younger folks. The field has been very good to me, and I want to be good to the field and help people on a one-on-one basis.

Murad: If you were not in academia, what would be your choice for a career?

Ed: I'd most likely be a musician, because it would never get old or tiring or boring, since there is always creativity involved. This is what I like about the academic life, as well. Alternatively, I might have pursued a career in international business, where I could enjoy the compare and contrast of dealing with multiple cultures at the same time.

Murad: How has your perception of yourself evolved over time?

Ed: It is hard to analyze yourself. After my OMT talk, a former doctoral student at Kellogg, who knew me when I was an Assistant Professor, gave me a compliment by saying that I seemed to be basically the same guy that I was back then. I think I have gained some wisdom over those years, but I know there's a lot I don't know. I do have a lot of energy, and I would like to think that I will continue to grow. You never stand still -- you either grow or decay. I'm having the best time of my life right now, and I look forward to saying that for a long time!

Murad: So besides multiple realities, what else would you wish us to take away . . . something that you wished you had been told when you were a junior scholar?

Ed: One of the things that I have learned relates to happiness in general. In academic life, you risk getting bogged down or even swallowed up in the careerist climb, which I believe is ultimately unhealthy. So, my closing message for junior scholars is: While you may look to

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your career to enrich your life, the payoff will likely be greater by focusing on love, good health, and positive stress (the kind that motivates you to change for the better). The best part is that focusing on love, health and positive stress will generate happiness not only for you, but also for those around you.