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Super-Management: An Examination of Organizational Images and Management Themes in Comic Books

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Abstract. Comic books provide outlets of popular culture imagery with a unique visual narrative to depict elements representative of organizations, their management, and their place in society. The cultural nuances portrayed in comics regarding management and organizations reflect, and potentially shape, attitudes, values, and behaviors of societal participants. To explore these issues, we conduct a content analysis of comic characters from the DC Comics and Marvel Comics Universe to identify and discuss themes and images in comics over a 70-year time period. We present our findings in relation to the five largest divisions of the Academy of Management (i.e., Business Policy and Strategy, Human Resources, International Management, Organizational Behavior, and Organization and Management Theory). Suggestions for applying comics and other visual narratives into future management teaching and research with the goal of providing a more relevant Academy are discussed.

1. Introduction

> Superman didn't become Superman. Superman was born Superman. When Superman wakes up in the morning, he's Superman. His alter ego is Clark Kent. His outfit with the big red "S", that's the blanket he was wrapped in as a baby when the Kents found him. Those are his clothes. What Kent wears - the glasses, the business suit - that's the costume. That's the costume Superman wears to blend in with us. Clark Kent is how Superman views us. And what are the characteristics of Clark Kent. He's weak... he's unsure of himself... he's a coward. Clark Kent is Superman's critique on the whole human race.
>
> Bill, Kill Bill Volume 2 (2004)

As illustrated by our opening quotation, comics and their characters provide timely commentaries on our society. Indeed, stories of Superman, Batman, Spider-Man, and other comic heroes continue to provide a timely fingerprint of ourselves by using a familiar and unintimidating format to make serious statements about attitudes, values, politics, ethics, and culture (Kirk, 2001; Fingeroth, 2004). The idea of an übermensch, or superman, was originally

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imagined and projected into the public domain by Friedrich Nietzsche 75 years before the first comic. Yet, it was the comic book that proliferated the idea. Many comic book characters are so recognizable and familiar that one can assume that any audience has a general understanding of the character's background and situation. Indeed, many throughout the world recognize Superman and are familiar with his alter ego Clark Kent. Such knowledge provides for a shared cultural understanding that may extend to a global level.

Throughout the long history of comic books and other visual narratives, an important component of many key characters' lives is their affairs within partnerships, teams, businesses, and other organizations related to leadership, ethics, and other areas examined by management scholars. For example, Superman's first few years of publication were aimed at stopping "the evil of greed" and targeted, primarily, corporate voracity and its impact on worker welfare (Wright, 2001: 11). For instance, in "The Blakely Mine Disaster" (DC Comics, August, 1938), Superman convinces a calloused mine owner that safer working conditions are needed by trapping him in his own dangerous mine. Similarly, there are early accounts of Superman reforming an automobile factory using inferior parts, punishing a group of dirty stockbrokers, and demolishing slums that need to be replaced by new, improved public housing. Such early storylines illustrate the Depression-era popular culture response that embraced Superman as a representation of how virtue resides in the common man and can overcome the immorality and greed prevalent in society at that time. Such lessons continue to be timely given the self-examination of organizations, their governments, and their industries in the wake of unparalleled corporate scandals and economic hardship worldwide.

As exemplified by Superman's early history, comic books are often full of complex characters, organizational politics, and other relevant topics to management and organizations that reflect complex elements of organizational functioning prevalent in popular culture. As such, they deliver important and powerful insights about the contemporary culture in which such stories are created (Rhodes & Brown, 2005). Comics have been advocated as rich sources that could be utilized to measure social values (Spiggle, 1986), and examples of comics have become prevalent in conjunction with management and business. Yet, little has been written in regard to the association and application of comics to management theories and organizational themes. To fill this gap in the literature, the purpose of this paper is two-fold. First, we explore how organizations and their management have been historically represented in the popular culture outlets of comic books. In particular, we are interested in determining how, over the decades, comic books have depicted organizations and the people working within them. Second, we explore how comic books depict organizations and how these depictions align with the content of popular management themes. Our intent is to examine how these popular cultural outlets might be integrated with business management concepts to improve our

understanding of organizations within an increasingly complex and changing world.

To accomplish these goals, we present four contributions to the management literature. First, we examine ways in which comics project organizational images by conducting a content analysis of comic characters from the DC Comics and Marvel Comics Universes. Second, we use this analysis, in conjunction with a historical review of U.S. comic books, to highlight how these visual narratives have closely reflected many of the changes that have occurred in society, including those involving organizations and other management themes. Third, we analyze the content of comic books stressing themes that align with key content areas in the broader management field. Fourth, we conclude with implications for future research as well as potential pedagogical efforts involving comics and related works.

2. A Selective History of Organizational Themes in Comics

Comic books are an important cultural narrative relevant to literature (Versaci, 2007), cultural history (Wright, 2001), philosophy (Morris & Morris, 2005), and psychology (Fingeroth, 2004; Rosenberg, 2008). Despite such influence, little has been done to use the actual content of comics to understand themes relevant to management and organizational research (see Gerde & Foster, 2008, for a recent exception). In the following sections we provide a brief chronological history of comics that we overlay with relevant events regarding the development of the management field.

The first adventure-based comic book with original material was produced by Detective Comics (later DC Comics) in the mid-1930s. In 1938, the advent of the first Superman comic sparked the "Golden Age" of comic books. The publisher of Detective Comics, Independent News Company, purchased the rights to Superman from Siegel and Shuster for $130. Independent News Company would later change its name to DC Comics. Subsequent to the release of Superman, other classic comic book characters like Batman, Captain America, Captain Marvel, and Wonder Woman emerged.

The comic books of the late 1930s and early 1940s primarily dealt with Depression-era stories of corporate and political corruption. For instance, the Green Lantern, in "The Tycoon's Legacy" (DC Comics, 1941), worked to establish low-cost legal services to protect against a powerful mortgage and loan company that was taking advantage of "mysterious accidents" to foreclose on poor citizens who otherwise would have no legal recourse. Large business organizations were often depicted negatively and, while some of the super-villains first emerging alongside the superheroes were corrupt businessmen (e.g., Lex Luther), most superheroes during this time battled more conventional and forgettable villains such as thugs, political lobbyists, and bank robbers

(Sanderson, 2006). Interestingly, the introduction of Batman in 1939, as a wealthy industrialist who uses the technological savvy of his corporate empire to fund the technological tools he uses to fight crime, came a year after Barnard's (1938) *The Functions of the Executive* provided the first modern theoretical treatise about top level decision makers.

During the time leading up to and surrounding World War II, depictions and storylines relating to the impending war were extremely popular (Wright, 2001). The war years naturally took on a patriotic overtone with enemies most often being depicted as Axis superpowers. Captain America emerged in 1941, the same year the U.S. become involved in the war. Many comic book writers and illustrators in this decade also used the opportunity to discuss racial and ethnic intolerance that perforated the workplace. Some comic books took advantage of the increased interest in foreign affairs to make statements against imperialism and racism, particularly within African and Asian jungle settings. In many cases, native rebellions against Western colonial rule were instigated by Nazi agents.

As the U.S. became more and more likely to enter the Second World War, storylines increasingly addressed the imposing threat of the Axis powers. Indeed, several months prior to the U.S. entering World War II, Captain America was depicted on the cover of *Captain America Comics #1* punching Nazi Germany's leader, Adolph Hitler (Timely Comics, 1941). This Captain America introductory comic was published in March 1941, prior to the Pearl Harbor invasion and the U.S.'s entry into the war. Similarly, the original Daredevil had his turn at the Axis leadership prior to America's entry into the war in "Daredevil Battles Hitler" (Comics House Publications, 1941). In this issue, Daredevil is engaged in series of adventures battling Hitler and several of his generals, where he is illustrated in one frame punching Hitler with the caption, "A fist barrage meets Hitler's face!"

In the post-WWII years, comics embraced genres such as true crime, horror, and western themes. From about 1947 to 1955, the organizations that were most often depicted in comic books were military, police or government intelligence organizations; these comics were targeted at the male audience and generally depicted hierarchical, no-questions-asked, leader-follower relationships. Indeed, soldiers and housewives were offered up "as role models for a generation coming of age in a time of both affluence and anxiety" (Wright, 2001, p. 110). As such, cultural norms discouraging women from the workplace and women as subordinates were typically reflected.

The "Silver Age of Comics" in the late 1950s and early 1960s was accompanied by a resurgence of popular superheroes from the Golden Age including the Flash (reestablished in 1956) and the Green Lantern (reestablished in 1959). DC, who had long emphasized community and social responsibility, then combined these to the long-running Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman characters to form the Justice League of America in 1960. In the 1960s, these traditional heroes were being challenged by less-than-perfect characters. Spider-Man, the Incredible Hulk, and the X-Men, among many others, gathered a strong

following because of their more human qualities such as uncertainty, insecurity, and estrangement. For instance, Peter Parker (aka, Spider-Man) was originally depicted as an unpopular, nerdy high school student who was constantly plagued with anxiety and self-doubt. Following the creation of NASA (the National Aeronautic and Space Administration) and the passing of the National Defense Education Act, both occurring in 1958, superheroes became more intellectual; often heroes used technology and scientific knowledge to overcome villains rather that sheer muscle.

During the early 1960s, teams of superheroes became more popular with Marvel Comics adding the Fantastic Four (1961) and Avengers (1963) to DC's Justice League of America. Key organizational issues were addressed more extensively, particularly leadership, trust, and resource utilization (i.e., appropriately using multiple superheroes with overlapping talents). Later, during the 1960s and early 1970s, a number of political issues were addressed, not least of which was the Vietnam War. Stories from this era also dealt often with racism, sexism, drug abuse, and political corruption. Indeed, business organizations were commonly depicted in a similar manner as in the Depression-era period – greedy and corrupt. Interestingly, a 1965 survey targeting radical college students in the U.S. found that the top four revolutionary icons of that era were Che Guevara, Bob Dylan, Spider-Man and The Hulk (Simpson, Rodiss, & Bushnell, 2004).

A focus on diversity during the Silver Age addresses the growing concern for civil rights, including Marvel's Black Panther (1966), the Falcon (1969), and Luke Cage (1972) – all black characters. Although less explicit, the X-Men, who were originally introduced in 1965 and later revamped in 1975, were persecuted for their mutant (as opposed to human) status; mutants of the X-Men universe are in a constant battle with the majority of the 'normal' population because they are held to be different and potentially dangerous. In fact, the X-Men illustrate how comics have addressed diversity in regard to issues surrounding race, gender, religion, and disability. For example, Storm is a black female, Nightcrawler is a devout Catholic, and X-Men founder, Charles Xavier, is aided by a wheelchair.

The "Bronze Age of Comics" revealed the darker side of society as a central theme in comic books. In addition to *The Amazing Spider-Man* and *Batman*, the best-selling comic books during this time period were primarily those featuring fanatical and estranged antiheroes that were prone to violence. Characters such as Wolverine of the Uncanny X-Men, the Punisher, Ghost Rider, and Spawn were among the more favored. Such darker topics paralleled the questioning nature of the management literature such as Allison's (1971) *Essence of Decision* that highlights the problem with single calculating decision maker and Janis's (1982) work on groupthink based on the Bay of Pigs fiasco during the Kennedy administration. Comic work of this era generally supported the overall cynicism consumers had about heroes and the identification most readers have with characters experiencing feelings of isolation and anxiety in daily life.

The "Modern Age of Comics", beginning in 1986, followed Frank Miller's (1986) *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* and focused on more adult-oriented themes, language, and character complexity. For instance, *The Punisher*, a Marvel comic debuting in 1986, featured a jail break from Rykers prison, a suicide, the death of an innocent child, and sexual interludes, all within the first three issues. The 1990s continued to bring about a more serious exploration of organizational topics than previous years, often from the perspective of multiple stakeholders with competing cultural values. Such work parallels management developments such as Czarniawska-Joerges (1992) *Complex Organizations: A Cultural Perspective* and Cox's (1993) *Cultural Diversity in Organizations*. This era in comics brought about a number of new characters from outside the U.S. For example, 1987 alone saw the introduction of characters outside of the U.S. such as Belphegor (France), Flying Fox (Canada), Fury (Greece), Kalki (Calcutta), Mister Sinister (England), Pozhar (Russia), Rumaan and Sumaan Harjavti (Africa), and Shado (Japan), to name only a few. The Modern Age continues to wrestle with complex and controversial issues. For example, following the disaster of 9/11, Spider-Man, a native New Yorker, is depicted overlooking the ruins with shock and agony, while Captain America quickly announces his entrance into the battle against terror. In 2003, the Justice League of America is noted to question the President's decision to invade the nation of Quarac; the President, in this case, is presented as Lex Luther, the evil arch-nemesis of Superman.

3. A Content Analytic Review of Comic Characters

To provide a systematic review of relevant material, we provide a focused examination of images of organizations in comic books that spans multiple decades and encompasses the most well-known and digested works. Specifically, we examine the two largest and most influential comic producers in the U.S., namely, DC Comics and Marvel Comics. These outlets have produced thousands of comics, inspired numerous motion pictures (e.g., Batman and Spider-Man), television shows (e.g., The Hulk and Wonder Woman), popular music (e.g., Black Sabbath's *Iron Man* and R.E.M.'s *Superman*), and provided the basis for numerous books (e.g., Rosenberg's 2008 collection of essay's entitled *The Psychology of Superheroes* is a particularly good read).

To provide a basis for our analysis, we examined two reference works: (1) *The DC Comics Encyclopedia* and (2) *The Marvel Comics Encyclopedia*. These two works include extensive coding in terms of characters (e.g., Spider-Man's occupation, base of operations, and year of first appearance are noted), and also chronicle details on superhero groups (e.g., The Avengers, The Justice League of America, and The Fantastic Four), and major plotlines. In the case of Marvel Comics, we supplemented our coding with *The Official Handbook of the Marvel*

Universe (Volumes 1 and 2). The coding in these reference texts was conducted by industry experts who are familiar with the characters, plotlines, and histories of the many comic books available. Both authors also read through each of the four available anthologies and examined emergent themes relevant to management research.

We coded 1,598 comic characters based on available information that could be used to enhance our understanding concerning how images of organizations have been used in comics. Consequently, we coded occupation, group affiliation, year the character was first introduced, and gender. We then examined trends concerning organizational images we discovered as the history of comics (as well as world history) progressed from 1935 (the year the first character was introduced in the reference material we relied on for analysis) to 2005 (the year the most recent character was introduced within our reference material). The purpose of this analysis was to examine how the presentation of societal trends in comics, specifically as they related to management concepts and themes, have paralleled and/ or transcended changes in society.

Our initial coding revealed the majority of characters were male (73%), with the most common occupational classification being simply 'adventurer' (219 out of 1,598 characters, or 13.7%) or 'criminal' (88 out of 1,598 characters, or 5.5%). However, numerous other classifications germane to modern organizations we also found in comics and included occupations such as architect, bookstore owner, businessman, car designer, CEO, chairman of the board, casino owner, college professor, curator, entrepreneur, executive vice-president, graduate student, industrialist, inventor, lawyer, model, newspaper reporter, psychiatrist, scientist, secretary, social worker, surgeon, and tavern owner. Our coding also revealed a number of 'former' professions assigned to comic characters that suggest that characters in comics are often created with links to a plausible back story that included occupations such as accountant, cab driver, dancer, electrical engineer, gardener, harbor patroller, interpreter, lineman, photographer, and schoolteacher.

Table 1 provides a selective list of comic characters organized by the time periods most commonly recognized by comic experts. The Golden Age of comics (1938-1955) corresponded to the least new character introductions (173 out of 1,598, or 10.8%) of the four major eras. However, some of the most memorable and enduring characters such as Batman, Superman, and Wonder Woman were introduced during this period. The Silver Age of comics (1956 - 1969) saw the introduction of 371 characters (23.2%), including Daredevil, The Hulk, and Spider-Man. This era also saw the introduction of some very well known superhero groups such as The Fantastic Four and The X-Men. The largest number of new characters came in the Bronze Age of comics (1970 -1985) where 555 of 1,598 characters (34.7%) were introduced. Many new characters were also introduced in the Modern Age of comics that ranged from 1986 to 2005 (499 out of 1,598 characters, or 31.2%).

Table 1: Examples of Occupations and Organizational Settings in Comic Books

Character	Previous or Current Occupation	Employer or Supporting Organization	Primary Geographic Setting	First Appearance
The Golden Age of Comic Books (1938-1955)				
Clark Kent/Superman	Journalist	The Daily Planet	Metropolis, U.S.	1938
Bruce Wayne/Batman	Billionaire Industrialist	Self Employed	Gotham City, U.S.	1939
Billy Batson/Captain Marvel	Radio Broadcaster	Radio Station	Fawcett City, U.S.	1939
Steve Rogers/Captain America	Soldier	U.S. Army	Camp Lehigh, U.S.	1941
Diana Prince/Wonder Woman	Diplomat/ Leader	Boutique Owner/ U.S. Government	New York City	1941
Robert Crane/Robotman	College Professor	University	Ivy Town, U.S.	1942
Dinah Drake/Black Canary	Florist/ Small Business Owner	Florist Owner	Gotham City, U.S.	1947
Vicki Vale	Talk Show Host	The Gotham Gazette	Gotham City, U.S.	1948
The Silver Age of Comic Books (1956-1969)				
Reed Richards/Mr. Fantastic	Military Scientist/ Genius	U.S. Government Special Projects Funding	New York City	1961
Bruce Banner/ The Hulk	Nuclear Physicist	U.S. Defense Department	New Mexico	1962
Peter Parker/Spider-Man	Freelance Photographer	Daily Bugle	New York City	1962
Charles Xavier/ Professor X	Professor/Psychiatrist	Xavier Institute for Higher Learning	Westchester, New York	1963
Tony Stark/ Iron Man	Industrialist/ Inventor	Stark Industries	Manhattan, New York	1963
Matt Murdock/ Daredevil	Lawyer	Independent Law Firm	New York City	1964
Pamela Lillian Isley/Poison Ivy	Eco-Terrorist	Research University	Gotham City, U.S.	1966
Alexander Summers/ Havok	Graduate Student	Xavier Institute	New York State	1969
The Bronze Age of Comic Books (1970-1985)				
Shanna O'Hara/ Shanna the She Devil	Veterinarian/ Zoologist	Central Park Municipal Zoo	New York City	1972
Johnny Blaze/Ghost Rider	Archeologist/ Stunt Rider	Various	Various	1972
Frank Castle/The Punisher	Captain, U.S. Marines	U.S. Marines	New York City	1974
Karen Starr/Power Girl	Software Designer	Infinity, Inc.	Los Angeles	1976
Brian Braddock/Captain Britain	Physics Student	Empire State University, NYC	United Kingdom	1976
Gabrielle Haller	Israel's Ambassador to the U.K.	Israeli Government	United Kingdom	1982
Elizabeth Twoyoungmen/ Talisman	Student/physician/ surgeon	College	Canada	1983
Jonathon Silvercloud/Forge	Inventor	U.S. Defense Department	Dallas, Texas	1984
The Modern Age of Comic Books (1986-present)				
Winston Manchester/Skyhawk	Entrepreneur	Various	New York, U.S.	1988
Dr. Roderick Campbell/Ahab	Geneticist	Unknown	Mobile	1990
Heidi Franklin/Pretty Persuasions	Former Exotic Dancer/ Criminal	Genetech	Long Island New York	1990
Arashi Ohashi/Arashi	Video Game Designer	Okonai (a games manufacturer)	Tokyo, Japan	1996
Courtney Whitmore/Stargirl	High School Student	Justice Society of America	Blue Valley, Nebraska	1999
Andrea Rojas/Acrata	Mesoamerican Anthropologist	Universidad Autonoma Metropolitana de Mexico	Mexico	2000
Benjamin Tibbits/Flux	U.S. Army Private	U.S. Army (Gulf War)	Washington, D.C.	2000
Veronica Sinclair/Roulette	Casino Owner	House (a casino)	Nevada	2001

4. Management Themes in Comics

Comic books provide an outlet for understanding how society and organizations are reflected in popular culture (Wolk, Reid, & MacDonald, 2004). It is clear that in many cases, comic books provide a forum to illustrate behaviors, beliefs, and stereotypes regarding organizations and their management. This section expands upon this idea to further elaborate on how comic books are useful for depicting organizations as they are, and foreshadowing how they may be in the future. We expand on this notion by applying identified trends and specific examples from various comic books to five of the most dominant areas of study in the broader field of management. In this way, we demonstrate relationships between the popular culture outlet of comic books to key themes in management. To provide a framework for our analysis, we looked for specific themes related to the five largest divisions of the Academy of Management: Business Policy and Strategy (BPS), Human Resources, International Management, Organizational Behavior, and Organization and Management Theory. We discuss examples of how management concepts from each division are reflected in comic narratives.

4.1. Business Policy and Strategy

The domain of business policy and strategy, which encompasses planning, decision processes, and other roles and problems of top management and their teams, is well represented in the pages of comics. Indeed, the pages of comic books are full of stories that exemplify competition between individuals, teams, and organizations illustrating such concepts as competitive dynamics and competitive advantage. Top managers are often reflected in comics, with a number of characters whose primary occupation is classified as either CEO, chairman of the board, or president. Elements of corporate diversification illustrating the need to carefully manage multi-business firms is evident for super-villains who often have a legitimate face in front of their evil empires such as Superman's arch-enemy Lex Luthor's LexCorp. Comic characters may also engage in more germane (albeit often nefarious) diversification decisions. For example, Lex Luthor once bought The Daily Planet in order to maintain power over the press. Superheroes must also be careful in managing their enterprises. For example, Bruce Wayne's (aka Batman's) Wayne Corporation is a multidivisional international firm whose branches include Wayne Aerospace, Wayne Biotech, Wayne Chemicals, Wayne Electronics, Wayne Entertainment, Wayne Foods, Wayne Medical, Wayne Industries, Wayne Shipping, Wayne Steel, and Wayne Technologies.

The composition and coordination of top management teams is well represented in the pages of comics. One of the most famous examples is DC Comic's Justice League of America, whose original members included Aquaman,

Batman, Flash, Green Lantern, Martian Manhunter, Superman, and Wonder Woman. This superhero group is unique in the treatment of corporate governance because the league bylaws specify that the chair position rotates for each new assignment; thus, each member of the team is equal in executive power and influence (Goodfriend, 2008). Executive teams in the Marvel universe include the Avengers (made up of characters such as Captain America, Black Panther, Hulk, and Iron Man), who are seen working with the Security Council of the United States and the General Assembly of the United Nations.

Strategic thinking and effective resource allocation is also prominently featured in comics. For example, although Batman has extensive resources, he shows a great ability to think proactively and select the right equipment to have on hand in his utility belt based on the foe he expects he will encounter. Both superheroes and supervillains are commonly seen making resource allocation decisions, particularly in terms of human skills and capabilities. Often, when super-teams are faced with a particular problem or crisis, the most appropriate members of the team is selected to try to solve a particular dilemma. The common portrayal of calling upon additional superheroes or additional superhero teams reflects the outsourcing mentality prevalent in many large organizations.

Examples of strategic decision making regarding resource allocation can be found in the various storylines about the X-Men. In the recent Marvel series, *X-Men: Messiah Complex*, Cyclops leads a team composed of Wolverine, Nightcrawler, Angel, and Emma Frost to find a child with special abilities. Not finding the child, Cyclops dispatches Wolverine (as the group leader), Nightcrawler, Angel, and Colossus on a mission to gather information about the missing child. He brings in specialized outside help from X-Factor (another mutant superhero team) asking Rictor to infiltrate a team called the Purifiers (a paramilitary/terrorist organization also looking for the child) and sending Jamie Madrox and Layla Miller to investigate another supervillain team called the Marauders. Later, Cyclops orders the reforming of the X-Force team (still another group) and assigns Wolverine to lead the team to, again, reclaim the lost child. During the final battle of this series, Cyclops sends the New X-Men (composed of young student superheroes) against the Marauders, believing that the evil team will be caught off guard by unfamiliar opponents. This strategy proves to be effective and reflects the complex strategic thinking evident in many comic storylines.

4.2. Human Resources

Comic books have often reflected a number of issues either directly or indirectly related to human resources and their management. Some of these issues overlap with those previously identified with the BPS division, particularly those dealing with the acquisition, allocation, and development of human resources (i.e.,

strategic human resource management). Following the previous X-Men example, we note the explicit use of Xavier's School for the Exceptionally Gifted as a means of training future, full-fledged X-Men. This training is multifaceted involving a science-heavy liberal arts education, team-building exercises, and lessons in individualized mutant-talent development and control. Comic books have an ongoing devotion to the strengths associated with diversity in the workplace. Diversity, of course, has been of long-term concern to human resource management research and addresses issues that relate to strategically optimizing fit between human resources and organizations (Williams & Bauer, 1994; Becker & Huselid, 2006). A spin-off of the X-Men launched in 1982, *The New Mutants* demonstrated a common them of diversity in comic groups by including a varied cast of characters from different backgrounds such as Karma (a Vietnamese girl), Wolfsbane (a Scottish girl), Psyche (a Cheyenne girl), Sunspot (a Brazilian boy), and Cannonball (a Kentucky boy).

The intricacies of workplace romance are of keen interest to HR scholars (e.g., Pierce, Aguinis, & Adams, 2000), and a variety of workplace romances are evident in the pages of comics. Examples range from Superman's relationship with Lois Lane, to Tony Stark's (aka Iron Man's) encounters with his secretary Pepper Potts, to Diana Prince's (aka Wonder Woman's) long time interest with Steve Trevor. The potential perils of workplace romance featured in comic books have also been noted in books such as Colón and Traig's (2007) *What Would Wonder Woman Do*? *An Amazon's Guide to the Working World*.

Given the crime-ridden environment that most superheroes consider to be their occupational environment, elements related to workplace violence are also prominent in the pages of comics. Batman, in particular, has been suggested as one individual especially prone to acts of aggression and violence (Tate, 2008a). In most current episodes, Batman is seen breaking the bones or jaws of his victims and early representations saw Batman throwing one criminal to his death off a tall building. However, these actions pale in comparison to other popular comic book characters. For instance, Frank Castle (aka The Punisher) considers coercion, extortion, killing, kidnapping, and torture to be acceptable crime-fighting tactics. Non superheroes such as J. Jonah Jameson, editor of The Daily Bugle, are also often depicted with potentially violent personality tendencies, or, at a minimum, a need to attend anger management classes.

Given difficulties that superheroes have keeping regular hours, it is perhaps not surprising that selection issues are often depicted in comic narrative. Peter Parker (aka Spider-Man) is often seen facing trials both as a superhero, as well as a teenager with little work experience. For example, in one recent Spider-Man ("Brand New Day", *The Amazing Spider-Man #562*) Peter is rejected from the offices of *New York Now Magazine* and told:

> Sorry, Parker, even though you've shot some great photos, Dexter Bennett says your work habits are poor. You miss deadlines. You don't show up where you're supposed to show up. And you don't always do a you're told.

4.3. International Management

The cross-border and cross-cultural relationships central to the international management domain have also found a home in the pages of comics over the years. International political issues have been extensively addressed, beginning with World War II and including the Cold War and the Vietnam War. For example, Iron Man often ventured into Vietnam, but eventually became more concerned with working more towards correcting social problems such as poverty and pollution. Eventually, Tony Stark (aka Iron Man) would lament his involvement in anti-Communistic actions, even years after he had terminated his very successful munitions manufacturing business in the name of peace (Marvel Comics, 1975).

In addition to overt discussions of international political issues, issues of international management have been discussed as comic storylines progress over time. Several superhero organizations are depicted as expanding internationally or creating alliances with international affiliates, thus protecting a larger portion of the world more effectively. Generally, these international organizations are self-governing, with minimal affiliation to the parent organization. For example, the Justice League of America developed the Justice League of Europe and the X-Men developed Excalibur (a British-based group) and Alpha Flight (a team that functions under a branch of Canada's Department of National Defense).

Comparisons are also made between the U.S. and other fictitious countries and cultures. For example, Superman's native Krypton is contrasted with the culture of the U.S. (as seen in our opening quotation). Wonder Woman is depicted as an Amazon warrior from Olympus. Aquaman stems from the lost culture of Atlantis. Such comparisons follow a rich history in the anthropology literature where scholars use allegory to provide a fresh perspective on cultural mores that become taken for granted as the norm. Examples include Miner's (1956) classic work on body ritual among the Nacirema (American spelled backwards) and, more recently Ketchen's (2008) essay on volunteering and shirking behavior among the DACA (highlighting strange behaviors associated with many members of the Academy of Management).

While many different countries and cultures are represented within comic books, few highlight the cross-border or cross-cultural differential forces that often impact business and management. Instead, most comic book characters tend to take on a global view, perhaps because so many superheroes have the ability to traverse the globe easily or because they so often are defending the entire Earth from an assortment of aliens from other worlds or dimensions. However, most superheroes or related characters do often maintain a high degree of pride in their heritage and continue to follow traditional customs, suggesting that comics provide a unique lens for understanding how individuals from different cultures can integrate into society while maintaining their unique cultural identity.

4.4. Organizational Behavior

The examination of individuals within groups and organizations is a key element of organizational behavior that is found in many comics. Like groups common to modern organizations, superhero groups are often seen facing challenges common to organizations. Wright (2001, pp. 204-205) describes the problems associated with hero teams well with his description of The Fantastic Four:

> The heroes' idiosyncrasies often impede their work as a team. They frequently argue and even fight with each other. The Thing throws destructive temper tantrums and has to be physically restrained by his teammates. The Human Torch briefly quits the group because he resents the three adults bossing him around. The Invisible Girl lets romance cloud her judgment by taking an interest in the Sub-Mariner, a sworn enemy of the Fantastic Four. And Mr. Fantastic blames himself for the failed space mission and the cosmic ray accident that robbed his friend Ben of his human appearance.

Contrasting styles of leadership can be found in many comic series. Gerde and Foster (2008) note, "Different leadership styles are shown by contrasting Cyclops, Storm, Xavier and others. The role of group instigator is adopted by Wolverine, who provides a critical perspective and fights against group think (p. 250)." Another example can be found in the R.E.B.E.L.S. (Revolutionary Elite Brigade to Eliminate the Licensed Extra-Governmental Interstellar Operatives Network) hero team who utilized a 'subliminal charisma program' to take over an interstellar police organization. Contrasts can also be made between organizations such as the Justice League of America, who tend to utilize democratic leadership styles, with super-villain organizations that tend to rely on autocratic leadership from a single key villain. For instance, Magneto, the founder and leader of the Brotherhood of Evil Mutants, relies extensively on his extensive power to generate and control magnetic fields as a method of leading the group and pressing his own political agendas.

An understanding of the genesis of personality and values can often be seen in the comic narrative (Rosenberg, 2008). For example, Superman's upbringing in rural Kansas by his loving adoptive parents resulted in a character that his enemies often lampoon as 'like a Boy Scout' in his steadfast honesty and purity of character. Kurt Lewin's famous equation $B = f(P,E)$ that argues that behavior is a function of personality and environment can be seen throughout the history of comics. For example, in contrast to Superman's idealistic behaviors, Batman (who also grew up an orphan, but in a much harsher urban environment) is often seen using excessive violence when dealing with his criminal foes (Tate, 2008a). In an even more extreme example, the previously referenced Magneto is depicted as a Holocaust survivor whose behaviors are largely driven by his desire to protect the mutant race from a similar fate of his family.

Comics also provide insights as to effective (and ineffective) means to dealing with stress (deLusé, 2008). Comic superheroes are often seen in dilemma-

producing situations where they must save the innocent or capture evil-doers. Superheroes often show a great ability to manage such stress in a productive manner. For example, Peter Parker (Spider-Man) was depicted as losing his beloved uncle in a senseless murder soon after his encounter with the radioactive spider that gave him his powers; at the same time he faced more common teen issues such as his difficult and often awkward romantic encounters with Mary Jane. Peter's creation of Spider-Man proved to be a healthy vehicle to channel such stressors in a positive direction. Such actions can be contrasted with other characters in the Spider-Man world such as Harry Osborn, whose father's death led Harry to adopt the villain identity of the Green Goblin.

4.5. Organization and Management Theory

The relations between organizations, their members, and the interactions between organizations and the environment is central to the domain of organization and management theory. Within the organization theory literature, one popular theoretical lens has been systems theory (Ashmos & Huber, 1987). For example, the control system framework has perhaps been the most embraced example of systems thinking in the organizational literature and applications of control systems have ranged from decision making (Cyert & March, 1963) to human behavior (Carver & Scheier, 1981; 1982) to the use of impression management within organizations (Bozeman & Kacmar, 1997). The classic example of a control system is a thermostat, which reacts to environmental changes in order to maintain equilibrium. The control theory framework is also extremely prevalent in comics, where the basic plot of most visual narratives consists of a storyline analogous to a control theory system that includes an introduction or setting, problem, and resolution/solution (Eisner, 1996). In many comics a new villain appears, the villain is defeated by the hero, and peace is restored to its natural state (at least until the next issue).

Although systems theory was once heralded as a major new paradigm for the study of organizations (Kast & Rosenzweig, 1972), the systems paradigm has largely gone out of fashion and a number of research opportunities have been missed by failing to adopt systems concepts (Ashmos & Huber, 1987). One reason for the lack of integration of systems theory is that a number of theorized systems (e.g., transcendental systems) are difficult to capture, measure, or otherwise study in traditional organizational contexts. However, comic books provide an attractive and dynamic setting to view popular culture perceptions of organizations using systems theory (cf. Hassard & Holliday, 1998). In comic worlds, characters often travel between time, space, and different dimensions with ease (cf., Collins, 2008).

Boulding (1956) applied the idea of systems theory to the study of organizations and proposed a hierarchy of complexity for different systems that

has been the benchmark for future scholarly work adopting the systems paradigm (e.g., Ashmos & Huber, 1987; Vancouver, 1996). The different systems range in complexity from simple static structures and patterns to complex transcendental notions that are unknowable. As shown in Table 2, elements of each of Boulding's (1956) systems can be found in comic narratives.

Feminist theory can also be found in comics (Robinson, 2004). For example, Wonder Woman was created by Dr. William Moulton Marston, a psychologist trained under Hugo Münsterberg (an early pioneer of industrial organizational psychology). Wonder Woman was created to present a strong feminine character, and the early stories by Marston incorporated current psychological theories of the 1920s and 1930s (Tate, 2008b). Feminist activist (and founder of Ms. Magazine) Gloria Steinem describes Marston's depiction of Wonder Woman as an early feminist hero (Emad, 2006). The stories of Wonder Woman also reveled how comics reflected society, as Wonder Woman's magic lasso (which forced its victims to tell the truth) was based upon Marston's work with the early polygraph. Wonder Woman, in particular, has been examined as a cultural artifact that reflects the sometimes disparate spheres of femininity and nation in U.S. history (Emad, 2006).

New technology implementation has been one of the most common themes in comics. The utilization of science and technology became particularly pervasive in the 1950s and 1960s with the introduction of space travel and the preoccupation with the Cold War and atomic capabilities. For instance, in *The Incredible Hulk #1* (Marvel Comics, 1962), the prominent atomic scientist Dr. Bruce Banner is transformed after his accidental exposure to gamma radiation. The source of many superheroes capabilities are derived from intelligent and innovative uses of technologies. For instance, Tony Stark's (aka Iron Man's) powers are entirely developed from a highly advanced armored suit that he developed in secret, while Bruce Wayne (aka Batman) uses a superior intellect in conjunction with a multitude of gadgets developed at Wayne Industries (the research and development unit of Wayne Corp.) to achieve his goals. Both superheroes and supervillains often rely on high technology extensively with comics featuring many scientific geniuses that supply advanced technology used for information, communication, and travel. From our analysis of the DC and Marvel Comic universes, there are 144 characters listed as scientists or technological experts. Many are listed with more specific occupations such as biologist, botanist, chemist, cyberneticist, electrical engineer, geneticist, nuclear physicist, neurosurgeon, physicist, and surgeon.

Table 2: Examples of Systems Theory Concepts in DC and Marvel Comics

Type of Systems	Definition	Related Examples of System from Visual Narratives	Simple Systems
1. Frameworks	Static structures (e.g., the structure of the universe)	The Bizzaro world provides an alternative universe for Superman	
2. Clockworks	Simple dynamic systems with predetermined, necessary motions (e.g., levers and pulleys)	Bruce Banner is transformed into the Hulk whenever he becomes angry (in early stories Bruce is transformed into the Hulk at sunset of each day)	
3. Control Systems	Cybernetic systems which maintain any given equilibrium within limits (e.g., thermostats)	Cyborg (aka Victor Stone) is equipped with experimental prosthetics that are controlled through complex feedback systems that interface brain and computerized circuitry.	
4. Open Systems	Self-maintained structures in which life differentiates itself from nonlife (e.g., cells)	Falling to earth from his native Krypton, Superman assumes supernatural powers in his new environment	
5. Blueprinted Growth Systems	Systems with a division of labor among cells (e.g., plants)	Multiple Man (aka Jamie Madrox) is a Marvel superhero with the ability to duplicate himself. These "dupes" have some autonomy and can function independently, but also are part of a collective consciousness.	
6. Differentiated Systems	Internal image systems with detailed awareness of the environment (e.g., animals)	Brute Force, a Marvel series, depicts several animals (e.g., eagle, bear, kangaroo) that were equipped with intelligence enhancing components to aid them in their fight to protect the environment. These animals develop a sense of self-awareness with their rise in intelligence to the point they name themselves.	
7. Symbol Processing Systems	Systems conscious of themselves (e.g., humans)	Captain America (Marvel Comics) provides a living symbol of America's Spirit of Freedom in his quest to overcome Hitler and other villains	
8. Social Organizations	Collections of individuals acting in concert (e.g., human groups)	The Justice League of America works as a collective force for world justice	
9. Transcendental Systems	Complex systems not yet imagined	The Captain Britain Corps is an alliance of interdimensional incarnations of Captain Britain, a Marvel superhero based in London, England. The Corps headquarters is located in the central nexus realm of Otherworld, which connects all other realms of the multiverse.	Complex Systems

Adapted from Boulding (1956) and Ashmos and Huber (1987)

5. Discussion and Implications

The famed Italian novelist Umbertco Eco (1979, p. 108) once commented on the self-identification of many readers with Superman and noted, "...any accountant in any American city secretly feeds the hope that one day, from the slough of his actual personality, there can spring forth a superman who is capable of redeeming years of mediocre existence." We believe that researchers, scholars, and

educators who embrace this form of writing will have an additional tool that can potentially influence future organizational leaders and society at large in a new and creative way. Thus, we conclude our manuscript by outlining implications for management educators and scholars.

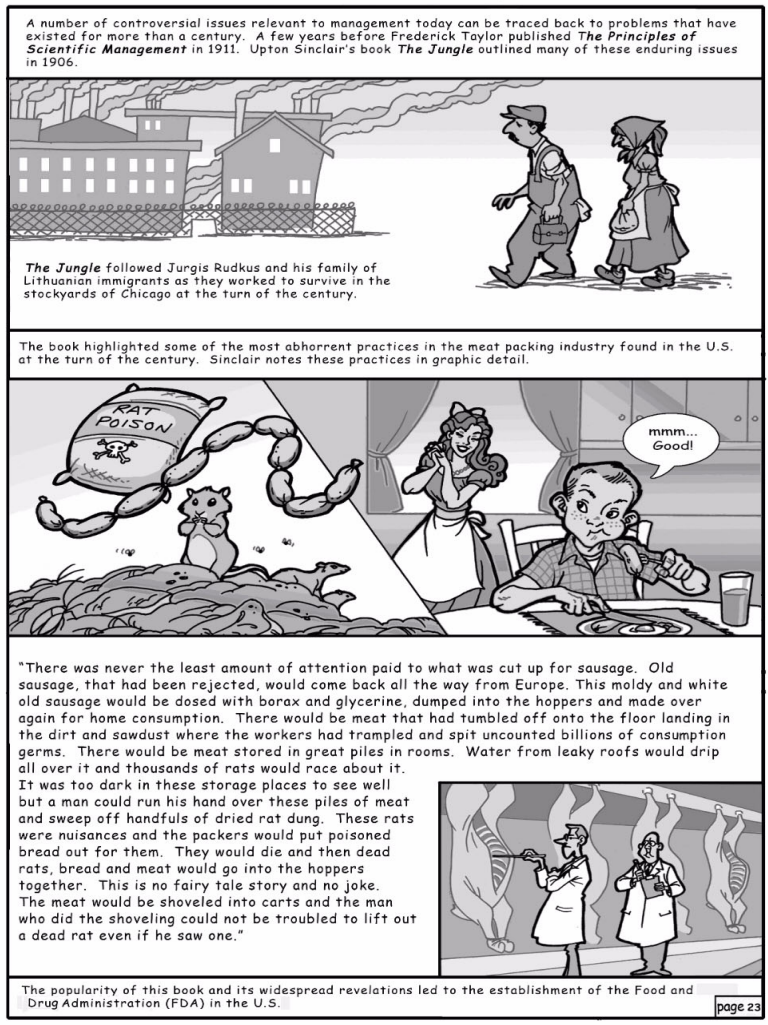
5.1. Implications for Management Educators

Management scholars have long lamented the translation gap between academics and practitioners and wondered why the Academy of Management, the premier association of management scholars and teachers, seems to have little impact on the audience of practitioners we aspire to serve (cf. Hambrick, 1994). As one potential remedy, scholars have encouraged organizational writers to eschew the use of dense, pompous, impenetrable writing (Grey & Sinclair, 2006) and recapture storytelling as a tool for advancing organizational studies (Kolb, 2003; Short & Ketchen, 2005). We believe that using comics, and working to create our own visual narratives, could be part of the solution to provide greater relevance for a more general audience.

A number of authors have relied on visual narratives to make material more relevant and accessible while still delivering detailed adult-oriented content. For example, Jacobson and Colon (2006) published a graphic novel adaptation of the 9/11 report. Likewise, the Pulitzer Prize winning graphic novel *Maus* (1973), by Art Spiegelman, recounts his father's story as a holocaust survivor in Nazi Germany. More recently, Short, Palmer, Ketchen, and Simon's (2010) *Atlas Black: Managing to Succeed* was introduced as the first graphic novel incorporating key elements of strategic management, organizational theory, human resource management, and organizational behavior and tells the story of two college students working to start a new venture. In the same vein, Harvard Business School recently published the first case in graphic novel format telling the story of an online retailer who is a victim of computer hacking (Austin & Short, 2009). If such writing becomes the norm rather than the exception, perhaps one day a major motion picture will be inspired by writing from Academy members rather than the latest comic.

Visual narratives provide a number of benefits for management educators that range from the ability to better reach visual learners to the ability to better target a female audience that has been historically a subject of bias in traditional textbooks (Short & Reeves, 2009). We believe that embracing comics and other visual narratives could provide for such novel writing that could be useful to management educators, practitioners, as well as scholars. Towards that end, we briefly illustrate the use of visual narratives tailored to a management audience taken from Short and colleagues (2010) *Atlas Black: Managing to Succeed*. Figure 1 provides an example of content based on Upton Sinclair's (1906) *The Jungle*.

Figure 1: Example of Graphic Novel Content Illustrating Historical Issues



Source: Short, J., Bauer, T., Ketchen., D.J., & Simon, L. (2010). *Atlas Black: Managing to Succeed*., Nyack, NY: Flat World Knowledge. Used with permission.

Sinclair's work represented an utmost concern for the individual workman at a turbulent time in U.S. history, and Sinclair's socialist ideals can be contrasted with capitalist notions inherent in Frederick Taylor's (1911) *Principles of Scientific Management*, a competing system for resources and ideological proponents at the turn of the 20th century. Of course, fears of job loss and concerns surrounding employee working conditions remain in our century, and Figure 2 illustrates contemporary issues related to the debate from which are manifested in Richard Bolles (2007) popular career guidebook *What Color is Your Parachute?* These figures provide only a slight glimpse into the possibilities

that could be offered when organizational scholars embrace the visual narrative format as a pedagogical tool.

Figure 2: Example of Graphic Novel Content Illustrating Contemporary Issues

Source: Short, J., Bauer, T., Ketchen., D.J., & Simon, L. (2010). *Atlas Black: Managing to Succeed*., Nyack, NY: Flat World Knowledge. Used with permission.

Incorporation of the visual narrative content could be used to spur discussion about current and longstanding fears concerning the worker in society and how such fears play a part in our shared culture. Research in technology has often adopted an open systems approach (e.g., Rousseau, 1979), and how technological changes are viewed in our culture could be brought to light in a simplistic and parsimonious form through the use of the visual narrative format. For example, the visual narrative format could be used to explicitly frame technological advancements as two ends of a continuum, with Taylor advocating the use of technology and the benefits of a capitalistic system (perhaps to the detriment of

human effort) at one end and Sinclair advocating socialism and job protection (even if inefficiency results) at the other. The notion of technology destroying society and/ or changing culture is not a new one, and examples of these fears are reflected in early tales such as John Henry versus the steam hammer to the DC Comic's Sentinel that describes robots designed to destroy organizational groups (e.g., the X-Men) or societies at large (e.g., New York City).

5.2. Implications for Management Scholars

Our analysis suggests that much work related to management and organizational themes can be found in the pages of comic books. The use of comic books as a narrative allows for the systematic study of a number of additional topics of interest to organizational scholars. For example, Hardy and Phillips (1999) use political cartoons as indicators of the broader societal discourse surrounding immigration in Canada, and comics could provide an alternative narrative lens on a number of issues reflecting business and society. The use of organizational narratives have been advocated for the study of collective identities (Brown, 2006), and comic books often contain struggles of individuals seeking to manage multiple personal identities as they navigate their environment (e.g., Peter Parker versus Spider-Man, Clark Kent versus Superman); as such, they provide a vehicle for future work examining the management of multiple identities in complex organizational and cultural environments.

Future research could use comic books to explore a host of topics that reflect the interaction between societal norms as well as utopian ideals. For example, an examination of how, where, and why superheroes (or other key supporting characters in comics) work to reform specific organizations as well as society in general could stimulate thinking for scholarly, practitioner, and student audiences. An examination of the role that comics play in changing or shaping organizations by legitimizing certain types of leaders, structures, or processes (e.g., Spider-Man dealing with fears, relationships, and career woes) might be used in conjunction with survey or clinical research to see if reading such works helps others deal with similar issues. Elements of institutional theory could also be empirically tested by comparing and contrasting similarities between DC Comics and Marvel Comics. For example, both publishers rely heavily on superhero groups, supervillain groups, patriotic characters, and new technology suggests that certain comic themes are institutionalized within the comic industry.

Future efforts could examine the extent to which comics reflect versus influence society. For example, the focus on technological innovations in the comics we analyzed suggest that the shift from an agricultural to service-based economy was already underway as the "Golden Age" of comics emerged in the late 1930s. Comic books could also be viewed as a catalyst through which society serves to enact its environment (c.f. Smircich & Stubbart, 1985; Weick, 1996). It

should be noted that the first episode of the classic Buck Rogers comic occurred approximately 30 years before the first manned space flight. Additionally, the telephone wiretap, later to be used heavily by the FBI and CIA, was introduced in Dick Tracy by cartoonist and writer Chester Gould. The London Science Museum recently featured an exhibit of innovations such as portable televisions and radio alarm clocks developed in the 1950s and 1960s that were inspired by the Dan Dare comics that began in 1950. An examination disentangling commercial innovations that were inspired by, as well as reflected in, comics would provide a contribution to future research using comics.

Examining how comic work have been translated into other media (e.g. TV and film) could also enhance our understanding of the influence of visual narratives on society. Arguably, many more people recognize comic book characters once they appear on the big screen (although Spider-Man creator Stan Lee's cameo appearances in numerous films and televisions shows suggests that some comic writers have transcended comics, film, and television). It would be interesting to explore how comic books are being translated into feature films. Which characters are being positioned as big screen stars? What are their occupations and positions in organizations? How do TV and film depictions differ from the comic book version? Certainly, the most popular and oldest superheroes have made their mark in the theatres (e.g., Superman, Batman, Spider-Man, and the X-Men). What exactly is the relationship between the popularity of the comic book and the decision to produce a movie? Answering such questions could further our knowledge of how comics influence other popular culture outlets.

An examination of technologies used in comics could inform research on opportunity recognition. We noted that many concepts and innovations in comics preceded their development in reality. Future research could use comic books as a means of detecting the process or timeframe involved in making the leap from concept to commercial product. Specifically, one could systemically link a conceptual innovation described in comics to the actual emergence of a similar product in the real world. The concept of the 'aha' moment has been cited by many entrepreneurs and inventors, and future research could survey or interview inventors and entrepreneurs to examine what role, if any, comics may have played in their opportunity recognition processes. Scholars have long recognized that the ability to advance technology and know-how, exploit those capabilities, and gain market acceptance of the new ideas, concepts, and products is a key strategic requirement for firms to be successful (Lei, Hitt & Bettis, 1996). Future research could examine if usage of comics (rather than the latest popular management trade book) would be a more effective way to stimulate employee ideas that could lead to successful innovations or other capabilities for the firm.

We noted many instances where comics focused on teams, team dynamics, and leadership. Superhero teams are generally less hierarchical and use less formal control mechanisms when compared to supervillain teams that are often dominated by a key, powerful leader who controls the team's activities through

the threat of power and promises of greatness. However, in both cases, the teams tend to be very fluid, with members constantly entering and exiting the organization. Yet, when facing off against each other these teams continue to show a great deal of equifinality, where different teams are functionally equivalent (Gresov & Drazin, 1997; Payne, 2006). Future research could examine these various strategy and structure issues by analyzing different comic book teams to determine if their configurations change over time and how these relate current practices occurring in reality. Similarly, one could systematically examine various leadership decisions, tracking the consistency, style, and success of these decisions according to various contingencies. For instance, a study could examine how team or organizational structures influence decision making and decision outcomes (cf. Davis, Payne, & McMahan, 2007). An examination of how different superheroes or villains view performance could provide insights into the strategic management field's goal of understanding the determinants of firm performance (cf. Short & Palmer, 2003). Overall, additional examination of comics could be a means of documenting the best and worst management practices, and perhaps lead to new insights in the field.

While our analysis focused on comic books, other visual narratives could provide additional insights into the interplay between graphic content and society. For example, the 'Comix' of the 1960s developed a number of adult-oriented themes based on drugs, sex, and violence. For instance, in The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers, the three primary characters are hippies who are typically trying to 'score some dope' without getting caught. This movement, beginning in the late 1960s, continues to this day as an underground movement to use comics to embrace counterculture subjects. Examining convergence and divergence of management and organizational themes between traditional comic books and the underground 'Comix' could provide an additional lens to view what management and society practices are considered institutionalized even across very different types of graphic texts.

6. Conclusion

> With great power there must also come great responsibility. (Spiderman creator Stan Lee)

Comic books provide a unique form of storytelling that effortlessly weaves elements of fantasy with themes and images common to contemporary management and business practice. Many stories serve as a basis for a shared national, if not global, understanding of the struggle between man and environment that conveys trials, tribulations, and struggles faced by many who work to understand and survive the perils of the modern competitive landscape. Comics provide insights into how many common occupations and types of organizations are perceived in relation to the norms of popular culture, but they

also provide glimpses as to what such entities might become. In some cases, they challenge our notions of what individuals and organizations could and perhaps should accomplish. With this ongoing struggle in mind, it is our hope that this article will provide an increased interest in comics as a unique visual narrative with the potential to shape our understanding of management and organizations for organizational scholars, researchers, and educators.

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