

Honoring the scientific endeavor of James March

If there is relevance to my ideas, then it is for the people who contemplate the ideas to see, not for the person who produces them.

For me, a feature of scholarship that is generally more significant than relevance is the beauty of ideas.

I care that ideas have some form of elegance or grace or surprise – all the things that beauty gives to you. James March (2008, p. 13).

1. Introduction to the special issue

James (“Jim”) Gardner March (1928–2018), Professor of Management, Political Science, Sociology, and Education, can be considered – without the threat of being confuted – *one of the most important thinkers in management history*. His contribution to the social science domain has been massive in quantitative terms – more than 700 published scientific contributions. His “leisure production” was not less prolific (more than 900 poems and 2 movies produced and/or directed).

The quality of this thought is not less titanic. In fact, his interdisciplinary and insightful research has impacted the management of organizations. His realist approach to the investigation of individual-organizational behavior and decision-making processes stands apart from other scholars. Among the most cited and influential works we can recall: *Organizations* (with Herbert Simon, 1958), *A Behavioral Theory of the Firm* (with Cyert and March, 1963), *Handbook of organizations* (March, 1965), *The technology of foolishness* (March, 1971), *A garbage can model of organizational choice* (with Cohen *et al.*, 1972) and *Exploration and exploitation in organizational learning* (March, 1991). These works have laid the foundation for a greater understanding of a broad spectrum of phenomena such as the negative and positive effects of bounded rationality, the boundaries and opportunities of standard operating procedures, the power of coalitions within organizations, the benefits of ambiguity between exploring-exploiting opportunities, and many other mechanisms at the basis of the management of organizations.

The influencing scientific legacy of James March is witnessed by the 300,000 citations of his works (Google Scholar, as of September 2021). The outstanding awards he received such as the Progress Medal from the Society for Progress in 2016 and, especially, his contributions through the development of new concepts, theories and fields of research that flourished. These include *routines* (Feldman, 2000), the *upper echelons theory* (Hambrick and Mason, 1984) and the *behavioral strategy* field (Powell *et al.*, 2011).

Despite the significant impact of March’s contributions in current studies about the management of organizations, relatively few scholars have committed to historically reviewing his works in the light of occurring advancements (Wilden *et al.*, 2019). Most of them have focused on the examination of the *Behavioral Theory of the Firm* (Argote and Greve, 2007; Augier and March, 2008; Gavetti *et al.*, 2012). In this regard, the proposed Special Issue aimed at more comprehensively *honoring and commemorating the scientific endeavor of James March* (even if Jim, due to his unpretentious personality, may not have liked being in the spotlight) [1]. We called for contributions that consider the historical evolution (i.e. ontology) of his scientific insights and included important lessons lost by the Scholar (e.g. leading *with ambiguity*). Our commitment had the intention of informing



important future research in the light of a meaningful past, according to a “taking stock and moving forward” rationale. Moreover, this would allow executives to learn how organizations and their processes have evolved since March’s original conceptualizations and understanding. Which of March’s contributions are enduring assumptions and which ones have been reconsidered by the occurring historical advancements about the management of organizations.

In this Special Issue of the *Journal of Management History*, we encouraged contributions honoring the works of James March, within a historical analysis. Shedding light on some management history evolutions, for example, from the Behavioral Theory of the Firm to Behavioral Strategy and from organizational learning to the learning organization. Yet, we encouraged cross-fertilizing analysis of March’s works with other fields (psychology, sociology, etc.) and his commemoration through the lens of his revisionists. In doing that, we have been opened not only to pieces oriented to “fully” agree with his points but also to papers that – through an historical approach – were oriented to move critics to his thoughts. Even if we, i.e. the guest editorial team, were not close to Jim, we think he would have liked being challenged for the progress of science.

To better convey the intentions of the Special Issue, and create a moment of debate among authors interested in his enduring ideas, a “virtual Submission Development Workshop” was organized on November 19th–20th, 2020. On this occasion, eight works were presented by scholars (from seven different countries). Feedback was given by the guest editorial team and the Editor-in-Chief of *Journal of Management History*, Prof. Bradley Bowden and discussion ensured an interesting debate arose around the “ambiguity” left open by Jim for the interpretation of organizational phenomena. This can be seen in [March et al. \(1976\)](#) where authors, by invoking a world of the absurd, intentionally included situations’ illustrations (at the basis of the phenomenon of interest) featured by *ambiguity* of possibilities, purposes and preferences of the organizational agent. This dynamic complexity is at the basis of other great concepts by Jim, such as the technology of foolishness – based on the combination of multiple agents, goals, options for solving organizational problems, and, not less important, chances and coincidences that come into play. The rationale behind his thought clearly emerged among the contributors: outputs of organizational phenomena are plural and can be read according to different lenses for their interpretation. This meaningful *affidavit* accompanied with elegant and sensible explanations have been considered as the main legacy that this *magister* transferred to all of us. We asked the authors to consider this point in their contributions. The workshop left a sense of “being part of the March’s community” and we thanked *the scholar* for having allowed us living an “Athenian evening” (as said by Prof. Milorad Novicevic at the end of the workshop) in debating management and organizational phenomena in light of his thoughts.

2. The contributions in this Special Issue

The promotion of the Special Issue through personal contacts with authors interested in March’s ideas and conference networks raised a very good number of submissions from scholars [2]. Their geographical dispersion and variety of interests was a first proof of how much March’s works have been widely influential [3] [4]. Each submitted paper passed at least two rounds of reviews, always followed with final comments of guest editors. In total, 31 scholars – to which we share our deep obligations – acted as reviewers. It has been very easy finding them, mainly due to the deep scientific gratitude that they expressed with regard to *the scholar*. This is another result totally attributable to Jim. In the end, 12 scholars

produced eight highly reputable works accepted for publication in this Special Issue; here, we offer a brief description of them for accompanying the readers through this Special Issue.

The opening article of the Special Issue is by [Schachter \(2021\)](#) entitled “James G. March and management history: the case of government reorganizations.” Schachter particularly looks at “The Case of Government Reorganizations” to demonstrate how celebrated management theorists such as March and Olsen (1983) valorize management history in their work to explain contemporary organizations. The paper proposes an interesting historical perspective as the 1983 piece from March and Olsen looks at history and how reports impact change while the current article examines the impact of the 1983 piece. As such, it is both an analysis of the text and a historical interrogation of the life of the text. The article presents exciting questions surrounding the competing discourses of reportage and interpretation as the tasks of history. Just as March and Olsen sought to interpret the symbolism of government reorganization as a means of examining their present and possible futures, Schachter examines post-1983 legislative initiatives as products of discourses exposed by March and Olsen and the interpretations of their work. To carry this argument further, the author subjects March and Olsen to *critical theory*; in general, the 1983 piece does not fare well but when contextualized appears to open doors for acknowledgement of the exploitative nature of symbols and rhetoric. Once again, this paper gives those of us who would look at management history from a critical perspective a means by which to access a mainstream venue for a less popular form of analysis. Establishing such conventional debates as US Government reorganizations as worthy of constructivist analysis enables postmodern views to contribute: “the anti-establishment side of March and Olsen’s presentation is its opening door to multiple, inevitably discordant interpretations.”

Then, two works relate with the leadership stream of research by Jim. First, [Fernández Fernández \(2021\)](#), recognizing that March’s thoughts on leadership are somewhat undervalued, conducts a post hoc “appreciation” of March’s contributions to the field of leadership; her work is entitled “March’s foolish views on leadership, or how to fail optimistically, pursue ethical authenticity, choose mindful resilience and enable ambiguous innovation.” In particular, Fernández Fernández draws on interviews and published works by March, as well as others who have written about him, to link his conceptualizations and ideas on leadership to the key tenets of authentic leadership. She finds that although March’s reflections on leadership are not necessarily captured in one place, when viewed together, they can inform and advance our knowledge on authentic leadership as an intelligent practice capable of balancing the complementary purposes of both leadership and management to achieve ambiguous innovation. For example, March described slack as unexploited or undiscovered resources. Organizations often find it difficult to find a balance between choosing to use resources for exploring, experimentation and innovation, or exploiting those same resources in terms of production and efficiency. From this perspective, the author contends that March viewed leaders as authentic and resilient “juggling fools,” capable of balancing the ambiguous dichotomies that distinguish leadership from management through optimistic failure and mindful resilience. Furthermore, when executed through the tenets of authenticity, she finds this ambidextrous approach to leadership as ultimately a positive outcome, resulting in self-actualization and fulfillment of purpose for the leader, as well as inspiring followers by encouraging them toward innovation. In this regard, March’s leadership contributions still offer insight to issues faced by today’s leaders.

Always with reference to the leadership studies conducted by Jim, [Badham \(2021\)](#), in his elegantly crafted article “James March and the poetry of leadership,” highlights three

overarching paradox foci in March's works, exploring paradoxes of rationality, performance and meaning. The paper reveals how March's work contributes to our poetic understanding of leadership in discussing how leaders appreciate, handle and live with these paradoxes. The author explains how March unveils the conundrum leaders' face in confronting contradictory demands to provide certainty yet acknowledge ambiguity. He masterfully exposes how this paradox of rationality is illustrated in March's discussions of "garbage can" decision-making, the value of "technologies of foolishness" and tensions between "exploration" and "exploitation." The paper then identifies the paradox that performance leaders face in communicating this conundrum. Grappling with conflicting pressures to appear authoritative and decisive yet also demonstrate humility and reflexivity, leadership performance and storytelling is, in March's words, a more or less "elegant dance along a narrow beam." Finally, the author uncovers how March demonstrates the manner in which managers and leaders are involved in a search for meaning as well as the communication of purpose, a burden they carry in a world in which "victory is elusive and virtue is not reliably rewarded." In concluding, the author highlights the profound contribution March's reflections make to leadership studies. He emphasizes the depth and complexity of the philosophical views and questions March raises as well as the esthetic elegance March demonstrates in how he addresses them.

After the focus on leadership, two works deepen the behavioral aspects of Jim's works. Gilles [Lambert's \(2021\)](#) article "James March: A Postmodern Perspective on Organization Without Management Theory" is presented through the lens of a fellow scholar and colleague as he offers an in-depth review of March's contributions around the concept of the development of the organization. Lambert's title of a "postmodern perspective" lends credence to the model where he illustrates a three-dimension categorization of March's work: individual decision-making, organizational functioning and organizational reinvention. The writer starts with the seminal work of [March and Simon \(1958\)](#) and then takes the readers through a chronological journey of March's formative concepts of ambiguity in learning, theory falsification, alternative theory of the firm, bounded rationality, the logic of appropriation, organizational slack, organizational intelligence, behavioral theory of the firm, to mention a few. Lambert posits "the wealth of his [March] contributions makes it particularly difficult to put his work in a pedagogical perspective." But one of the most exciting discourses in the paper states, "March is universal before being American," as it reflects the collective impact of March's work. Finally, the author admits that March, through its concepts, does not adhere to the logical, sequential and performative approaches in management (i.e. the garbage can model). One must agree with the author in that it is hard to pigeonhole or condense March down to a single concept; his comparisons with classic literature and love for poetry denote the variegated philosophies of March.

The [Augier and Barrett \(2021\)](#) article "March-ing to the Beat of a Maverick Drummer: Insights from John Boyd to Inform Behavioral Perspectives" brings a different perspective to the behavioral science literature and a different viewpoint to the articles for this special edition on James March. As a fellow scholar and student of March, the author relates how March's work is universal and multidisciplinary by drawing parallels between the fields of behavioral science (James March) and strategy (John Boyd). The authors show how the work of a scholar can be translated into practice by a wartime strategist for the Pentagon. Through well-developed charts, Augier and Barrett clearly illustrate the parallelisms between "Boydian and Marchian" concepts and ideas. Moreover, the piece encourages readers to stop and review behavioral science models and concepts through a different lens and pursue further comparison and contrast studies. The author closes with additional

research ideas for assessment and divergence, such as investigating “additional behavioral ideas such as the use of analogies as mechanisms for analysis, synthesis, and learning.”

Following, two articles deal with the historical influences of [March and Simon's \(1958\)](#) book *Organizations*. This book, now published over 60 years ago, is one of March's earliest works and has been cited over 35,000 times. This prompted [Lemken and Andersson \(2021\)](#), through their article, “Tracing the influence of James March's most cited works: an empirical approach using historical analysis of co-citation contexts,” to follow its linkages and evolution through March's subsequent scholarship as cited in the works of others. Using within context co-citation analysis, the authors explore works in which management scholars cite both March and Simon's *Organizations* and another work by March. Through this social construction approach to their analysis, [Lemken and Andersson \(2021\)](#) explore how the meaning of [March and Simon's \(1958\)](#) *Organizations* has evolved over time. Among their findings, they note that Chapters 5 and 6 (conflicts and cognitive limits) account for over 60% of March's co-citations. Furthermore, the authors suggest that this focus progressed and narrowed over time and in line with modern management's focus on behavioral theories. As such, their “genealogy” shows how context analysis can assist in linking the ideas of scholars through time and demonstrate how periods of management history tie together.

[Mills, Novicevic and Roberts's \(2021\)](#) article “ANTi-History of the Functionalist Paradigm in Organization Theory” raises some interesting questions related to the influence of March and Simon's book *Organizations* (1958). They not only reveal the power of the ideas in the book to prosecute the functionalist paradigm but also surface some challenges in historicizing this influence. While the common use of citation counts can provide some insight into the importance of work, this article nudges the readers to wonder, “How the ‘uncited’ influence of a work be measured?” If an idea from the work becomes enrolled in our actor-network, do we use it as a given rather than citing the source? Could researchers use a content analysis to identify uncited uses of concepts that they would link to March or work that cites intermediate articles? In this regard, the authors provide the example of Karl Weick's praise of James March, which, in large part, is praise of his coauthored book – *Organizations* – but also raises the problem of a faltering interest in *Organizations* as witnessed by a serious drop in the number of citations of the book during the 1960s through to more recent times. Following Weick, Mills, Novicevic and Roberts not only praise James March and his works but also seek to contextualize his contributions to explain how that praise is historicized through a series of practices of the associated actor-networks.

Last but not least, [Bachani's \(2021\)](#) article “A Case for Poetry as History and a Methodology with Poems by James G. March” presents a selection of poems written by March, to contribute to this unknown side of this intellectual giant also being a poet. The selected poems are about business professors, students, awards, universities, scholarship and the nature of academic work. It is a different way to know his ideas, as he lived them, as poems are his artistic self-expression. It is not biographical or a literary critique of his poetry, but rather poetry as methodology. March often advocated for using poetry in management, in many lectures and essays. Using a selection of his poetry, this article makes a case for using poetry as a methodology that allows scholars to get to truth and beauty in ways other methods do not. Poetry is an expression of embodied wisdom in experiential form, such that imagination and intuition are invited in, to create multiple subjective meanings through the process of reflexivity. In addition to making it hard to access poems by March, this article also promotes that our research methods be extended to include poetry and the arts.

3. Implications and the way forward

Deriving implications from March's works is not easy due to the vast amount of topics touched by this grand scholar. Few of them, derived from the bounded knowledge of guest editors, can be related to read – through the management history lens – the: passage from dominant coalition to Upper Echelons Theory and superstars' CEOs; shift from technology of foolishness to rational technologies; connection between March's original "focus of attention" with the attention-based view of the firm, and mindfulness; connections and differences among standard operating procedures, routines and dynamic capabilities; transition from aspiration and organizational adaptation to co-evolutionary processes.

Apart from the above, other great implications for theory, in general, and management history, in particular, emerged from the contributions included in this collection.

Schacter (2021) raises several interesting questions beyond the discussion of March and Olsen. The first is the nature of organizational research to eschew history in favor of mathematical relationships without considering that these relationships are products of historical inquiry. A management historian could emulate March and Olsen's approach with other ahistorical research and demonstrate the history it contains. A second line of enquiry provoked by the article is the potential seeds of critical management studies in positivist work. Researchers could look to the unexplained roles of independent variables as levers of control exploited by organizations.

By researching and organizing March's thoughts on leadership, [Fernández Fernández \(2021\)](#) discovers underlying principles of authentic leadership. Future researchers should incorporate these as tenets of authentic leadership theory and explore how they impact the theory and its outcomes. March's conceptualizations could particularly speak to leader–follower challenges faced in today's workplace, including balancing quality of life and mental health concerns with increasingly dynamic and more demanding workplaces.

Badham's article (2021) leaves us with two very important implications for future research, namely, research insights can be (and should be) uncovered by analyzing the life works of intellectual giants, extracting meaning from their content and presenting them in a systematic way that can be then used for further research and practice; and the aesthetic delivery or narrative of research can often be as important as the content of the research; maybe we ought to revisit historical works through the lens of the crafting of the research message and learn if and how the crafting influences the message itself. Indeed, stepping back and analyzing common threads in historical works while appreciating and unveiling meaning in the narrative opens a world of research opportunities.

Yet, [Lambert \(2021\)](#) further encourages the reader to continue the work started by March and produce concepts that do not betray the shortcomings of reality and finally use the Marchian approach as a "theoretical filiation" for new areas of study. In particular, March was a passionate teacher more interested in the progress of each of his students than in their final level reached. In terms of research, its approach is similar. The apparent romanticism that he demonstrates by considering his concepts and models (i.e. garbage can) as being there to be replaced one day masks a real tactic to make the social sciences evolve. He suggests a structuralist approach similar to that used by Lévi-Strauss in anthropology or Foucault in philosophy. It is not a question of testing a hypothesis, but of making a particular situation intelligible. March, therefore, invites us in our scientific approach not to seek generalization, which for him requires the development of necessarily reductive models. We must give primacy to field data. If our research remains as close as possible to the action as it is carried out, the malice of the actors in the decision will then teach us original concepts which can enrich our existing models (bounded rationality, ambiguity in

decisions, logic of appropriation of roles, . . .). And to better identify them, March invites us to decompartmentalize the sciences in our approaches to empirical observation. He demanded at the Stanford Graduate Business School that his courses be open also to students of Humanity, Science, Engineering, Education and Earth Science. March encourages us to open our investigations of organizational behavior to developments in psychology, sociology and philosophy to avoid excluding too quickly from our analyzed concepts perceived as irrational. This implication emerges also from the work by [Augier and Barrett \(2021\)](#), who invoke the spirits of March and Boyd to inspire the reader to continue to explore “the synergies between ideas, empirical observations [of the scholar], and the experiences of the practitioner.”

The research by [Lemken and Russell \(2021\)](#) opens up many possibilities for management historians. While content analysis is not necessarily new to management history, using the specific method of co-citation contexts allows researchers to explore the creation and development of management thought over time. Tracing topics in this way forms links between the past and present and even offers insight into future directions of particular theories and topics.

[Mills, Novicevic and Roberts \(2021\)](#) raise some interesting questions related to the influence of March and Simon’s book *Organizations* (1958). They discuss the power of the ideas in the book to prosecute the functionalist paradigm. However, they surface some challenges in historicizing this influence. In contrast to [Lemken and Andresson \(2021\)](#), they state that the use of citation counts can provide some insight into the importance of work but when reading the article, they began to wonder, “How could we measure the uncited influence?” If an idea becomes enrolled in our actor-network, do we use it as a given rather than citing the source. Could researchers use content analysis to identify uncited uses of concepts we would link to March or work that cites intermediate articles. Here, they cite the example of Karl Weick’s praise of James March, which, in large part, is praise of his coauthored book – *Organizations* – but also raises the problem of a faltering interest in *Organizations* as witnessed by a serious drop in the number of citations of the book during the 1960s through to more recent times. Like Weick, while coming to praise James March also seeks to contextualize his contributions to explain how that praise is historicized through a series of actor-networks.

The implications for future work emerging from the work by [Bachani \(2021\)](#) are of interest for management historians. Indeed, March’s poems may provide fodder for stimulating the imaginations of many other poetry lovers who may have kept it as a private matter, just as he did. It may be a way for a future biographer to know the lesser known aspects of his work. There is also a proposition to consider poetry as a methodology that brings in the personal, feeling theories that make space for embodied lived experiences and wisdom to be added for making complex, ambiguous and contradictory paradoxes a part of our knowledge that become more complete and representative of the human experience

At the end of this long journey, we can firmly state – in contrast with Jim’s “ambiguity” – that his impact on our field has been huge. Our experience of the pure willingness of scholars to contribute to the Special Issue and present their works within the organized workshop, the enthusiastic acceptance of reviewers to support us behind the scenes, the messages received showing, for example, pictures with *the scholar* and recalling past memories with him are each evidence of how much Jim has contributed to the development of a number of fields. And, how he has touched the life and scientific direction of a massive amount of researchers around the world. These proofs of genuine affection were not really expected at the beginning of this project and those are the best

memories that we want to share with readers of *Journal of Management History* and this Special Issue.

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Notes

1. "I am not now, nor I have ever been, relevant" (March, 2008; p. 13); this is how he usually started his classes at Stanford.
2. Sinergie-Società Italiana Management Conference 2020 (www.sijm.it/sinergie-sima-2020-conference/).
3. European Academy of Management Conference 2020 – SIG 12 Research Methods and Research Practice (<https://conferences.euram.academy/2020conference/>).
4. Academy of Management Conference 2020 (<https://aom.org/events/annual-meeting>).

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