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Discipline as Institutional Maintenance: The Case of Business School Rankings

Abstract:

Drawing on the case of business school rankings, we study how institutions are maintained and remain persistent despite their contested nature. We argue that rankings as institutions can be maintained through subtle disciplinary practices that freeze power relations in recipient organizations. Our analysis rests on a Foucauldian understanding of control emphasizing that rankings discipline (1) by enhancing the visibility of individuals' performance, (2) by defining 'normal' behavior, and (3) by shaping how people understand themselves and the world around them. We show that these three disciplining effects support rankings' durability, reproducibility, and communicability enhancing their overall stability and diffusion. Our arguments demonstrate that rankings' relevance and impact is not entirely based on the legitimacy they are able to offer to ranked schools. Rather rankings impel a variety of disciplinary effects within business schools which help to stabilize and diffuse the institution.

Keywords: business school rankings, institutional maintenance, disciplinary control, organizational field

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INTRODUCTION

Rankings have turned into a dominant force in the context of higher education in general (Hazelkorn, 2011) and business schools in particular (Wedlin, 2006). A variety of rankings influence the field of management education including assessments of institutional research output (e.g., the UK's Research Excellence Framework), journals (e.g., the *UT Dallas*' journal list), and individuals' research yield (e.g., ISI's highly cited researcher lists). This paper is concerned with rankings of business school degree programs (e.g., the *Financial Times* Global MBA ranking or *The Economist* Which MBA? list). These widely disseminated measures of quality have been criticized from a variety of angles. Some scholars have argued that rankings are based on narrow and manipulable metrics (Adler & Harzing, 2009; Dichev, 1999), while others have emphasized that the ranks of the top schools are very stable over time creating path-dependent effects (Devinney, Dowling & Perm-Ajchariyawong, 2008; Morgeson & Nahrgang, 2008). Business schools themselves complain about the significant amount of resources necessary to gather the data for the rankings, particularly as different publishers use different criteria (*The Economist*, 2002). In 2004, Harvard and Wharton even announced that they would no longer supply data to the relevant media agencies and would also not cooperate in contacting students and alumni to carry out the necessary surveys (Thompson, 2011).

Despite these (and other) attempts to challenge the legitimacy of business school rankings, their importance has grown significantly. Few people would disagree that rankings are here to stay. As Wilson and McKiernan (2011: 462) point out: "Despite their failings, their ambiguity and their imprecision, business school rankings have become reified." This points to an interesting puzzle: How can rankings maintain their

impact on the field of management education despite their contested nature? This paper addresses this question by discussing the conditions under which rankings are rationalized and become stable institutions that diffuse over time and space. Our analysis theorizes rankings as institutions (i.e., “enduring elements of social life”; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006: 216) and builds on knowledge in the literature on organizational institutionalism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). In particular, we are addressing the discourse on institutional maintenance, as we are reflecting on those mechanisms that support rankings’ continued impact and relevance.

So far, institutional theorists have explained the maintenance of rankings by pointing to the existence of isomorphic effects among business schools. Wedlin (2007), for instance, shows that schools adopt rankings to legitimize themselves and to be recognized as belonging to a group of like-minded organizations. Not much different, Corley and Gioia (2000) find that schools face strong pressures to ‘play the ranking game’ whether they like it or not. Underlying these explanations is the idea that schools respond to isomorphic pressures by complying with widely accepted standards for evaluating the quality of their degree programs. While this perspective helps us to better understand why rankings persist despite their widespread critique, they reflect field-level analyses neglecting the role of the individual. In this paper we argue that rankings also maintain their status as prevalent institutions because they discipline individuals within business schools. We show that rankings’ disciplinary control stabilizes their impact and supports their further diffusion within the field of management education.

We theorize the role of discipline by drawing on the work of Michel Foucault. Foucault’s notion of disciplinary control is not focused on direct control or even punishment. Rather discipline unfolds in a more subtle way; it is reflected in and

through social relations that rationalize and normalize individual and collective behavior (Foucault, 1978, 1980). Disciplinary control rests in human interaction and cannot be reduced to single individuals. Power is a practice of shaping relations among people and influencing the ‘way of being’ within organizations (Barker & Cheney, 1994). Our argumentation follows a Foucauldian perspective for two reasons. First, Foucault’s (1978: 191) analysis of discipline emphasizes the role of the individual and its embeddedness in social relations. Conceptualizing institutional stability in this way helps us to move beyond the field-level perspective of existing work. Second, a Foucauldian perspective allows exploring how discipline acts as a productive force. Discipline defines what counts as ‘true’ knowledge and ‘normal’ behavior, while at the same time this knowledge also generates further disciplinary effects (Foucault, 1980: 52). It is this productive interplay of knowledge and disciplinary power that helps us to explain the maintenance of business school rankings.

Our main argument is that rankings discipline (a) by making individual’s performance visible according to a predefined set of metrics, (b) by homogenizing behavior and defining what is ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’ within a given organizational context, and (c) by shaping how people understand themselves and the world around them. We suggest that these disciplinary mechanisms influence three key properties of rankings as institutions – i.e. their durability, reproducibility, and communicability. Our discussion shows that the influence of disciplinary control on these properties stabilizes rankings as institutions and helps to maintain their relevance on the wider field of management education.

Our discussion contributes to and extends two scholarly discourses. First, we extend the literature on business school rankings (Dichev, 1999; Morgeson &

Nahrgang, 2008; Wedlin, 2011). Although scholars have pointed out that rankings are maintained because business schools operate in an uncertain and fragmented organizational environment and hence adopt rankings to increase their legitimacy (Corley & Gioia, 2000; Whitley, 1984), this perspective neglects the role of individuals in stabilizing and reproducing this institution across the field. Our analysis attempts to connect the well-established debate of macro-level institutions in management education (Meyer & Rowan, 2006) with the more recent emphasis on the individual subject (Vidaillet & Vignon, 2010). Second, we contribute to research on institutional theory by incorporating a Foucauldian perspective on disciplinary power into discussions of institutional maintenance. Such a perspective emphasizes the socially constructed nature of rationalized practices and complements the view that institutions are maintained through structural isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Our discussion shows that rankings' disciplinary control creates objectifying and subjectifying effects that rationalize beliefs and practices and thus help to maintain institutions.

Our analysis proceeds as follows. The next section sets the stage for our analysis by conceptualizing business school rankings as institutions which are embedded into the organizational field of management education. The following section introduces Foucault's understanding of power and, based on that, discusses the various ways in which rankings discipline the behavior of individuals in business schools. The next section shows how these disciplinary effects help to maintain rankings as institutions by enhancing their stability within adopting organizations and supporting their further diffusion throughout the field. The last section discusses the implications of our analysis and introduces avenues for future research.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: RANKINGS AS INSTITUTIONS

Institutions and Institutional Maintenance

We define institutions in their broadest sense as “enduring elements in social life [...] that have a profound effect on the thoughts, feelings, and behaviour of individual and collective actors.” (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006: 216) Institutions are embedded in organizational fields (Wooten & Hoffman, 2008). Early institutional theorists have highlighted that such fields consist of the totality of relevant actors in an area of institutional life (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 1995). Members of an organizational field share a common meaning system and, as a result, interact more frequently with one another (Scott, 1994). Other authors have adopted a more issue-based definition emphasizing that the field itself results from dialog and negotiation among a diversity of actors around a contested issue (Hoffman, 1999; Zietsma & Winn, 2005). According to this theoretical understanding, organizational fields are constituted in and through the exchanges of a variety of actors with disparate interests about the issue in question.

The question of why institutions persist across time and diffuse across space has been addressed by the literature on institutional maintenance (Guler, Guillen & Macpherson, 2002; Kennedy & Fiss, 2009; Strang & Meyer, 1993). Institutional orders need to be maintained; they need to be recreated and supported on an ongoing basis in order to unfold their full effects. Although institutions by definition exercise social control over adopting organizations and hence are self-reproducing, it would be naïve to assume that institutions simply exist without any kind of maintenance (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). Early institutional theory conceptualized institutional maintenance

largely as structural isomorphism – institutions become stable and diffuse because a population of organizations faces coercive, mimetic or normative pressures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). This bird's eye view on maintenance was criticized for its neglect of the social and cognitive processes underlying the reproduction and diffusion of institutions (Hasselbladh & Kallinikos, 2000: 700).

Linking maintenance to social and cognitive processes implies to adopt a social constructivist perspective. The social construction of rationalized beliefs can help to explain why some institutions gain a remarkable diffusion and visibility, while others fade away. Zilber (2010), for instance, adopts a discursive perspective and shows how the diffusion of narratives within an organization can help to stabilize institutions. Greenwood, Suddaby and Hinings (2002) demonstrate how professional associations actively manage the creation of shared understandings in an organizational field leading to the maintenance of institutions (for a similar analysis see Quinn-Trank & Washington, 2009). The work by Angus (1993) focuses on how institutions are reproduced through public recognition of compliance shaping the continuous rationalization of beliefs and practices associated with institutions, while Zilber's (2002) study shows that the social construction of institutional maintenance is influenced by routinizing the ongoing reproduction of members' shared cognitive schemes.

While this stream of literature has significantly advanced our understanding of how institutions are maintained over time and space, the role of disciplinary control in stabilizing and diffusing institutions remains undertheorized to date. Prior research has shown that institutions can be maintained through monitoring (Fox-Wolfgramm, Boal & Hunt, 1998) and that control can also be exercised through the deliberate creation of barriers to institutional change (Holm, 1995). These analyses treat control largely as an

explicit and formalized organizational activity, but fail to account for the fact that control can also rest on power relations that are less visible and formalized (i.e. disciplinary control in a Foucauldian sense). One notable exception is the work by Townley (1997) who illustrates how disciplining effects are linked to the production of particular types of knowledge in organizations. While discipline has been recognized as one way to conceptualize institutional maintenance (Lawrence, 2008), it remains largely unclear how such control rationalizes practices as well as beliefs and hence embeds them into social contexts. Our analysis puts a particular focus on how disciplinary control creates objectifying and subjectifying effects by which organizational practices and beliefs are rationalized into widely recognized institutions (i.e. business school rankings) and, as a result, help to sustain these institutions over time and space.

Business School Rankings as Institutions

While business school rankings have traditionally shaped the North American higher education context (Elsbach & Kramer, 1996), the rapid internationalization of the field of management education has made them equally relevant in other geographic regions (particularly Europe and recently also Asia). Nowadays, few deans would disregard the importance of the highly public rankings issued by the *Financial Times* (launched in 1999), *BusinessWeek* (launched in 2000), the *Wall Street Journal* (launched in 2001), and *The Economist* (launched in 2002). The growing homogenization of program offerings and the increasing international positioning of these programs reinforce the importance of rankings as ways to measure and compare their quality (Hazelkorn, 2011). Hence, it is hard to ignore that business school rankings

have turned into widely disseminated *institutions* reshaping the context of higher education (Pfeffer & Fong, 2004).

Our emphasis on business school rankings as institutions stresses that the latter have developed into a stable and widely accepted phenomena in the context of management education. Understood in this way, rankings reflect “patterned higher-order effects on the actions, indeed the constitution, of individuals and organizations without requiring repeated collective mobilization or authoritative intervention to achieve these regularities.” (Clemens & Cook, 1999: 444-445) Rankings also reflect institutions in the sense that they are supported by a variety of organizational practices which control action outcomes. Rankings do not just exist in abstract disembodied ways, but they become objectified in administrative routines, documentations, numerical work, and, related to that, actors’ everyday behavior (McKinlay & Starkey, 1998; Miller & O’Leary, 1987).

Following Scott’s (1995) analysis of the elements of institutions, we suggest that rankings reflect an institution in three different ways. First, rankings contain *regulative* institutionalized elements, as they establish rules regarding ‘what counts’ when evaluating business schools and their programs (e.g., increase in graduates’ salaries). Although rankings do not directly monitor compliance, they specify a variety of metrics that business schools need to adhere to (for an overview see Table 1). Second, rankings contain *normative* institutionalized elements, because they create certain expectations within recipient organizations and thus help to define roles and the social obligations attached to them. Understood in this normative way, rankings determine what constitutes appropriate and therefore legitimate behavior within business schools. Last but not least, rankings also contain *cultural-cognitive* institutionalized elements, since

they shape common frames defining what is taken-for-granted and culturally supported within business schools. For instance, the belief that rankings play a crucial role for the future success of an organization is a deeply embedded belief (Dahlin-Brown, 2005). Together these three elements influence behavior and create stability and predictability of social life (Scott, 2003).

Put Table 1 About Here

We analyze rankings as one institution in the organizational field of management education. Various actors mutually influence each other in the context of this field, including, but not limited to: business schools, accreditation agencies, media outlets, government agencies, graduates, consultants, and potential employers. Although this field possesses a variety of shared patterns of meaning enabling stability and coherence of actions, many of the underlying issues remain contested and are subject to regular debate. For instance, the usefulness of one of the key degrees in management education, the MBA, has been continuously questioned (Bennis & O'Toole, 2005), while the practical relevance of business schools' research output remains debated as well (Rasche & Behnam, 2009). Rankings are embedded into this contested field, while at the same time structuring the latter. Wedlin's (2011) analysis shows that rankings are used as devices to build schools' positions and legitimacy. Her study illustrates how rankings symbolically represent the structure of the field by ordering competing schools and thereby supporting the discursive construction of their legitimacy.

Rankings face a variety of criticisms. Some scholars argue that rankings support a narrow view of science in the sense that the reputation of a school is measured by

faculty publications in a pre-selected list of, mostly North-American, journals (Adler & Harzing, 2009). Others have criticized rankings' path-dependency. While the positions of early entrants remains almost unchanged over time, the positions of new entrants are very dynamic (Devinney et al., 2008). In a similar vein, Morgeson & Nahrgang (2008) find that schools' positions in the *BusinessWeek* rankings remained almost unchanged over the years. There is also methodological critique arguing that rankings focus on isolated (and manipulable) aspects of school performance and hence do not reflect a good proxy measure for quality (Dichev, 1999). In 1998, the *Financial Times*' first attempt to launch a business school ranking was so fiercely criticized that the ranking was withdrawn and relaunched a year later (Crainer & Dearlove, 1998). Some universities have even tried to form a coalition to jointly boycott the *U.S. News and World Report* rankings, however without much success (Lemann, 1998).

This sustained critique begs the question of why business school rankings remain relevant despite their widespread critique? Of course, one straightforward answer to this question would be that the majority of actors in the field of management education desire rankings. In a world without rankings, business schools would lose an important source of legitimacy and differentiation (Corley & Gioia, 2000; Wedlin, 2011), while potential students and employers would give up an easily accessible measure of reputation and quality. In other words, schools aim to be ranked because they would not be perceived legitimate without a ranking. While this answer stresses institutional theory's traditional focus on securing legitimacy, we approach this question by arguing that rankings unfold disciplinary control within business schools leading to stabilizing effects that reinforce their institutionalized character.

BUSINESS SCHOOL RANKINGS AS DISCIPLINARY INSTITUTIONS: A FOUCAULDIAN PERSPECTIVE

Foucault and Disciplinary Power

Foucault's work has been extensively discussed and applied in management studies (McKinlay & Starkey, 1998) affecting discourses like organization theory (Burrell, 1988), human resource management (HRM) (Townley, 1993), and business ethics (Crane, Knights & Starkey, 2008). While Foucault's extensive body of work has given insights into a variety of phenomena ranging from the role of madness in Western history to a discussion of the history of sexuality, it is his conceptualization of power and control that has been most frequently discussed by management scholars. Townley's (1993) analysis, for instance, shows how HRM creates disciplinary practices that 'produce' individuals within organizations. Her argument rests on the insight that HRM constitutes and produces knowledge in organizations and that this knowledge unfolds disciplining effects. Not much different, Sewell & Wilkinson (1992) show how just-in-time production systems discipline workers by making their work processes more visible. Our analysis builds upon these accounts, but also reaches beyond them insofar as we discuss the effect of disciplinary control on the maintenance of institutions.

Foucault's analyses are based on a particular understanding of power. Power is not simply introduced from the 'outside' and also not a property that can be possessed (Foucault, 1978: 176-177). Rather power unfolds through the day-to-day interactions among people; it functions as a 'network of relations'. As Foucault remarks, "in thinking of the mechanisms of power, I am thinking rather of its capillary forms of existence, the point where power reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches

their bodies, and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives.” (Foucault, 1980: 39) The *individual body* is both the “object and target of power.” (Foucault, 1978: 136) The body is understood to be ‘analyzable’ and ‘manipulable’ in the sense that it can be trained and shaped through disciplinary practices. That is why Foucault talks about ‘docile bodies’ – bodies that are shaped through discipline. Discipline in this sense reflects one particular form of exercising power. It is not about controlling the entire body or even punishing it through enslavement, but to limit the body in terms of deeds, motions and attitudes (Downing, 2008). This controlling of the body is not necessarily directly repressive. Foucault understands disciplinary power as a productive force making the body more useful in an economic sense (Foucault, 1978: 182-183). The subtle ways of disciplinary power aim at making the body more efficient and productive.

Rankings as Disciplinary Institutions

In his seminal work *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1978: 170-192) distinguishes three disciplinary techniques for creating docile bodies. We use these techniques as a yardstick to organize our analysis of how rankings produce disciplinary control over individuals in business schools.

Hierarchical Observation through Rankings. The first technique, *hierarchical observation*, aims at organizing individuals in a way that they are constantly under surveillance thus making them more visible (Foucault, 1978: 170-177). Visibility (i.e. the knowledge of being watched) creates discipline. The point of hierarchical observation is not that there is constant direct surveillance of individuals, but that since people do not know whether they are observed, they behave *as if* they are being

watched (Downing, 2008). Observation in a Foucauldian sense is about self-policing rather than rigorous external monitoring. Hierarchical observation is not limited to physical observation, but also, and maybe most of all, includes observation through collecting and analyzing data about individual behavior (Giddens, 1985: 184; Miller & O'Leary, 1987: 239). Of course, rankings require business schools to do exactly that: to produce a significant amount of statistics about various aspects of performance (Wedlin, 2006). For instance, the *Financial Times* Global MBA Ranking requires schools to generate information on different subject areas ranging from faculty research to the employment of graduates (Bradshaw, 2007). As most schools participate in different rankings simultaneously, producing such data on a regular basis becomes an important part of organizational life affecting almost all members of the organization.

The availability and continuous production of data enables surveillance of individuals in two interrelated ways. First, as Espeland & Sauder (2009) remark, it makes schools' reputation visible and gives the impression that their performance can be judged easily (even by non-expert audiences). Rankings are released on an annual or at least biannual basis and are swiftly disseminated via print media and the Internet. This high visibility creates disciplining effects. Individuals need to constantly work on improving their performance vis-à-vis a small set of indicators. Any drop in a ranking is easy to identify and usually paired with negative economic consequences which are likely to feed back to employees (e.g., decreased job security). As Foucault (1978: 175) remarks, this makes surveillance a "decisive economic operator"; a way of disciplining into higher performance and productivity. The disciplining effects associated with rankings' visibility are hidden, as they rest on judgments by a network of constituents (e.g., potential students, employers, alumni). Because it is unclear what exactly rankings

measure – with opinions ranging from school performance (Dichev, 1999) and quality (Sauder & Espeland, 2006) to reputation (Corley & Gioia, 2000) and customer satisfaction (Zemsky, 2008) – the visibility of a school's rank contains a lot of interpretative flexibility making it attractive to a wide audience of 'lay judges'.

Second, rankings also increase the visibility of peoples' performance within business schools. The systematic documentation and collection of data creates visibility around the performance of individuals (for a related discussion in the context of human resource management, see Townley, 1997). For instance, *The Economist* requires data on applicants' GMAT scores enhancing transparency around the performance of program managers. *BusinessWeek* measures the effectiveness of a school's alumni network making the performance of alumni officers' very accessible. Such indicators objectify the performance of individuals and turn their attention to formerly neglected parts of everyday work life (Sauder & Espeland, 2009). Because the individual as a subject becomes socially constructed as an object of knowledge, its intra-organizational visibility increases significantly. How someone contributes towards a school's position in a ranking becomes visible. As Foucault (1978) argues, this visibility does not imply direct supervision. Rather it produces self-monitoring behavior, since actors know that their performance is visible vis-à-vis the indicators specified by rankings. Such self-monitoring objectifies the individual because it makes people internalize an observer's perspective as a primary view on their selves.

Normalizing Judgment through Rankings. Foucault's second disciplinary technique, *normalizing judgment*, disciplines behavior by defining what is commonly perceived to be 'normal'. As Foucault (1978: 182) remarks, "it refers individual actions to a whole that is at once a field of comparison, a space of differentiation and the

principle of a rule to be followed.” Normalizing judgment homogenizes behavior (because it demands conformity), but also defines the ‘abnormal’ and hence uncovers differences between peoples’ performance (because it allows to assess gaps). Rankings normalize individual behavior by creating dichotomies through which we classify the ‘normal’ and exclude what is ‘abnormal’. The different ranking criteria act as a guide in this context. For instance, it becomes normal to employ faculty with PhDs (one of the measures for faculty quality by *The Economist*), to focus on directly applicable knowledge (one of the items included by the *Wall Street Journal*), and to consider average industry salaries when placing students (as alumni salaries are measured by the *Financial Times*). This is not to say that schools would neglect these (and other) issues if rankings were non-existent. Rather it suggests that rankings help to create an “artificial order” (Foucault, 1978: 179) within business schools; an order which defines categories of knowledge that become self-justifying (Barker & Cheney, 1994).

The normalization process underlying rankings has a corrective function. It allows identifying gaps, since it fixes reference points for individual and collective sensemaking. These reference points are perceived as constraints and allow for judging non-observance; they form the basis for comparing, differentiating and hierarchizing individuals. As Foucault (1978: 180) remarks:

“We have a distribution between a positive pole and a negative pole; all behaviour falls in the field between good and bad marks, good and bad points. Moreover, it is possible to *quantify* this field and work out an arithmetical economy based on it.” (our emphasis)

The quantification of relevant information supports normalizing judgment, as it enables people to distinguish much quicker between the normal and the abnormal. Information on business schools' performance is not by definition quantitative. Rankings *convert* qualitative into quantitative information, a practice that is referred to as commensuration. Commensuration simplifies by decontextualizing and depersonalizing knowledge as well as neglecting significant amounts of information (Espeland & Sauder, 2007; Espeland & Stevens, 1998). However, commensuration also increases the perceived authority of information because it absorbs some of the ambiguity that is attached to qualitative data (March & Olsen, 1976). This mixture of simplified, yet authoritative, information supports the corrective function of normalizing judgment: (a) it directs attention to a few selected issues making the comparison of performance and the identification of gaps much easier (because other facets of performance are deemed irrelevant) and (b) it makes longitudinal assessments of normalized behavior much easier (as measures are stable and comparable). The reduction of semantic richness through quantification reinforces rankings' disciplinary control by making people fearful of the humiliating and easily identifiable effects of non-observant behavior.

Examination through Rankings. *Examination* combines the two prior techniques and reflects the regular observation of normalization. Examination is a ritualized technique ensuring that individuals are frequently overlooked and graded. Foucault (1978: 184-185) argues that examinations help to establish knowledge and consequently a 'truth' about individuals; they objectify individuals by imposing power and knowledge relations upon them and by situating them into a network of documentation and writing (Foucault, 1978: 189). Rankings do not examine in the sense of physically auditing individual behavior, but they force schools to regularly produce

documents (e.g., about research performance, faculty quality, incoming class features) which fix and capture the subject. The creation of such documents makes it possible “to classify, to form categories, to determine averages, to fix norms” (Foucault, 1978: 190) and hence turn individual subjects into analyzable and comparable objects.

To examine via documentation makes each individual a ‘case’; it exposes the particularities of individuals and shows the need for further training, correction, and normalization (Schwan & Shapiro, 2011). Understanding rankings as examinations shows Foucault’s understanding of the interplay of knowledge and power: rankings establish knowledge about subjects and by doing so also control their behavior. For Foucault (1978: 188-189) examinations are deeply woven into the organization. Subjects do not directly feel or see the exam; they only feel and reflect on its effects. Examinations constitute the individual as an object, but also, at the same time, affect how individuals constitute themselves. Discipline does not make individuals passive objects but influences their self-understanding and identity construction (Heller, 1996; Rabinow, 1991); a process “by which we assert ‘who we are’” (Barker & Cheney, 1994: 28).

While some authors have claimed that rankings act as templates for shaping the *organizational* identity of business schools (Elsbach & Kramer, 1996; Wedlin, 2006), a Foucauldian analysis emphasizes that rankings also shape how *individuals* understand themselves and their work. Individuals experience the effects of the documentation produced by rankings (e.g., in terms of rewards or punishments). These effects steer processes of self-reflection creating identities like ‘top researcher’, ‘valued teacher’, and ‘successful program manager’. Although the subject in a Foucauldian sense is decentered and embedded into a network of power relations, it is still active in processes

of self-formation. Subjectivity is formed as a product of actors' exposure to and engagement in multiple normalized practices that make the individual observable. (Zembylas, 2003)

Taken together, the three disciplinary mechanisms show how rankings establish disciplinary control over individuals. All mechanisms discipline by *objectifying the individual* – subjects are turned into objects appearing to be analyzable independent of their agency. Hierarchical observation objectifies the individual by enhancing her/his visibility within the organization. This acculturates people to adopt an observer's perspective on their own behavior separating them from others. Normalizing judgment objectifies the individual by creating categories into which people can be classified. Examination objectifies the individual by transcribing peoples' features into documentation. The resulting depersonalization makes the individual an analyzable object and influences processes of self-formation. The analysis up to this point is summarized in Table 2.

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DISCIPLINARY CONTROL AS INSTITUTIONAL MAINTENANCE

We now argue that the disciplinary control exercised by rankings affects their diffusion across time and space. We suggest that disciplinary control has an impact on rankings' durability, reproducibility, and communicability – three properties of institutions which shape the stability and diffusion of rationalized beliefs and practices (Hasselbladh & Kallinikos, 2000).

Durability: Maintaining Rankings through Self-Fulfilling Prophecies

Durability is about the enduring nature of an institution; its ability to survive over time despite being challenged (Clemens & Cook, 1999). Our analysis frames rankings' durability as resting on self-fulfilling prophecies shaped by disciplinary control.

Rankings' influence on subjectification processes aligns the self-understanding of actors with ranking criteria. This altered self-understanding shapes the cognitive schemes of individuals and helping them to suppress alternative interpretations of these criteria. Gill (2009), for instance, shows how researchers change their points of reference for sensemaking when confronted with pressures to respond to narrowly defined research and teaching expectations. If actors alter the way they understand themselves and their work, they reproduce the assumptions embedded in rankings and, as a result, make rankings more durable. Here, the durability of rankings rests on a self-fulfilling prophecy: rankings are durable because what rankings measure influences peoples' self-understanding (and hence the behavioral norms they respond to) which in turn justifies the measures (see also the discussion by Espeland & Sauder, 2007). This constitution of actors stabilizes rankings within business schools and creates barriers to change. For instance, if student employability is understood in terms of 'value for money' (e.g., measured by salary increases), then this particular conception of employability is regarded as relevant and justified. The durability of such self-fulfilling prophecies is hard to challenge, as people conceive of themselves as *reacting* to the measures, whereas in fact they are *enacting* them (Weick, 1979).

Rankings' durability is also enhanced by the disciplining nature of the visibility they create. Since rankings introduce metrics into business schools that make people comparable, it is easier to distinguish between high and low performers. One possible

consequence is that management will raise its expectations regarding high performers, while low performers are seen to have little potential. Framing expectations in this way can create a self-fulfilling prophecy (Eden, 1984): raising expectations regarding high performers often enhances their performance. This model of self-fulfilling prophecy has been described as the Pygmalion effect (Livingston, 2003) and rests on internalized changes in self-expectancy (e.g., influencing motivation) and supervisor expectancy (e.g., influencing leadership style). The Pygmalion effect strengthens the durable nature of rankings, as those employees who are aligned with ranking criteria are more likely to be promoted/rewarded, while underperforming employees are likely to leave the organization. The Pygmalion effect reflects a self-selection mechanism that stabilizes the role of rankings within business schools.

The disciplining effects of commensuration also enhance rankings' durability. The metrics produced by commensurative practices create barriers to alternative interpretations of ranking criteria. Codified metrics often act as a source for redesigning existing organizational practices (e.g., reward systems and selection/promotion processes). Redesigning these practices can create another self-fulfilling prophecy: the more such practices are aligned with the metrics propagated by rankings, the more people will enact these metrics over time (Ferraro, Pfeffer & Sutton, 2005). For instance, aligning reward systems with ranking criteria by focusing on specific metrics justifies these metrics and inscribes rankings into important organizational practices. This increases the durability of rankings' effects, since challenging the ranking would imply to challenge fundamental organizational processes underlying the operation of business schools.

Reproducibility: Maintaining Rankings through Enacted Codifications

While durability explains rankings' stability *within* business schools, reproducibility and communicability help to understand institutional maintenance at the field level. Reproducibility refers to "the capacity to reproduce a rationalized pattern or package in quasi-identical form and enact the relationships it implicates." (Hasselbladh & Kallinikos, 2000: 709) The reproducibility of an institution largely depends on how clearly its underlying rules are specified. Rankings rest on highly specified rules, as they discipline through commensurative practices producing aggregated numbers. This formal codification decontextualizes rankings and makes them easily reproducible (as metrics can be enacted quickly in different contexts). For instance, it is easier to reproduce the metric 'average GMAT score' than to reflect on applicants' quality through a narrative account.

It is important to understand that it is not the mere existence of metrics that enables rankings' reproducibility across time and space. Rather it is the *enactment* of these metrics and their belonging social relationships that diffuses rankings as institutions. Simply reproducing the metric in a different context is not sufficient, as rankings need to be sufficiently embedded into new organizational settings in order for them to be reproduced. It is the disciplining character attached to commensuration that enables the enactment of rankings within business schools and their successful reproduction throughout the field of management education. Commensuration directs peoples' attention to what is considered to be 'normal' helping them to enact their own organizational reality (Weick, 1995). Rankings reproduce because the disciplinary control attached to their commensurative mechanisms helps to quickly embed them into different organizational context (see also Giddens, 1985 on disembedding mechanisms).

Communicability: Maintaining Rankings through Discourse

We understand communicability as reflecting “how easily a rationalized package can cross an organizational field, be understood and conveyed to others than those involved in its conception, construction, and initial use.” (Hasselbladh & Kallinikos, 2000: 710) Communicability is about expressing the key features of rankings in a way that new adopters can easily connect to its basic pillars. We argue that rankings’ disciplinary features shape the discourse on management education at the field level and thus enhance the communicability of this institution. In particular, commensuration and subjectification homogenize what language people from *ranked* schools use. Faced with a set of homogenized metrics, people start to use comparable terminology to discuss similar issues. Wedlin (2011), for instance, shows that rankings helped to construct a ‘customer perspective’ throughout ranked schools on both sides of the Atlantic. Of course, changes in field-level discourses are also influenced by how people understand themselves and their work. For example, if scholars see themselves as ‘high performing researchers’ based on the criteria defined by rankings, this particular way of self-understanding is likely to diffuse throughout the community of ranked schools (for a discussion of how language shapes the diffusion of institutions see Fiss & Hirsch, 2005).

As management education reflects a field with a high density, because people from ranked and non-ranked schools are connected and communicate in a variety of ways (Sahlin-Andersson & Engwell, 2002), the homogenized discourse created among ranked schools is likely to spill over into the wider discourse on management education. Rankings significantly influence the language actors from ranked and *non-ranked*

schools use to describe/compare/benchmark the main features of their field. As a result, organizations interested in ‘playing the ranking game’ can relate much better to the ‘rules of the game’ (Corley & Gioia, 2000), as the latter are expressed in rather mundane terms resting on established significations and meaning structures. This enhanced communicability makes it easier to frame the adoption of rankings as an opportunity (rather than a threat) influencing the diffusion of the institution within the organizational field.

IMPLICATIONS, CONCLUSIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This paper has argued that rankings are able to maintain their status as a widely acknowledged institution because of the disciplinary effects they unfold within business schools. These disciplinary effects make the impact of rankings on schools more durable, while also enhancing their reproducibility and communicability. Taken together, our arguments show the significance of acknowledging the impact of micro-organizational behavior on institutional maintenance. Of course, rankings also maintain their status as institutions because business schools engage in mimetic isomorphism adopting rankings to increase their legitimacy vis-à-vis competitors. By contrast, explaining institutional maintenance through disciplinary control emphasizes the role of the ‘governed individual’ in stabilizing and diffusing institutions. Our analysis shows the usefulness of such a micro perspective on maintenance, and we conclude by outlining three implications of our discussion for future research.

First, there is need to better understand the *socially constructed nature of rankings’ maintenance*. Rankings cannot be viewed in separation from the organizational realities they try to portray. In fact, their effects are shaped by the very

reality they are attempting to represent. Discipline is a powerful force to structure this reality because it influences the enactment of behavioral norms within schools. Understanding rankings in terms of discipline makes us aware that individuals create many of the opportunities and constraints they subsequently experience as ‘given’. Rankings may appear as hard facts representing business schools’ organizational reality, whereas in fact a school’s position within a ranking is influenced by how and in which ways disciplinary control unfolds.

As schools are likely to show differences in terms of hierarchical observation, normalizing judgment and examination, our framework can help to explain variation among adopters in responding to rankings (see also the discussion by Corley & Gioia, 2000; Espeland & Sauder, 2007). Analytically distinguishing disciplinary mechanisms from their effects is important, since discipline does not necessarily result in unquestioned obedience. For instance, it is possible that discipline results in avoidance or manipulation, particularly when the self-perception of an organization does not match with its position in a ranking (Elsbach & Kramer, 1996). Future research needs to identify variations in responses to rankings by differentiating the conditions that influence how discipline unfolds in different organizations, for instance by referring to Oliver’s (1991) framework of responses to institutional pressures. As variations in responses are largely invisible to those using rankings, there is a significant degree of uncertainty attached to schools’ ranks.

A second implication of our analysis regards the *role of the subject*. As discussed, the disciplinary control exercised by rankings helps to objectify the subject within business schools. Rankings turn the individual into an analyzable object that can be compared/benchmarked/managed. Such objectifications bring about a transition of

emphasis from the individual subject (with its unique experiences, capabilities, and idiosyncratic character) to the decontextualized role. Organizational duties become decoupled from the individuality of persons and are transformed into predefined roles that can be assigned to different members of a collectivity, as long as people can fulfill the criteria associated with the role (Hasselbladh & Kallinikos, 2000). For instance, rankings have helped to decontextualize the role of the researcher by defining good scholarship largely through where and how often scholars publish (rather than what they publish). This makes researchers easier to replace as role specifications depend on a selection of widely diffused criteria rather than assessments of an individual's fit with the organization. In this sense, rankings' communicability enhances the diffusion of role definitions throughout the field. Unfortunately, current research has detached the discussion of rankings from the role of individuals working in business schools. Future research needs to investigate how rankings help to transform the individuality of persons into predefined roles. This requires bridging the macro-micro divide by investigating how the diffusion of rankings within the field helps to define a 'template' for developing role definitions.

A third implication concerns the *moral dimension of rankings*, which, unfortunately, has remained largely neglected to date. A Foucauldian (1979) perspective emphasizes that disciplinary control is productive – discipline emerges as an effect of knowledge (while also influencing the latter). As Foucault (1978: 194) writes in *Discipline and Punish*: “power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth.” The discipline exercised by rankings produces organizational roles and tasks, performance measures (and their belonging documentations), and influences individuals' self-understanding. These changes create a

variety of, often unintended, yet enduring effects, including changes in resource allocation to maximize compliance and peoples' status within organizational hierarchies. By standardizing, comparing and observing behavior, rankings create winners and losers, both on an organizational as well as individual level. While research has shown that rankings help to define an 'elite' among business schools (Wedlin, 2007), the intra-organizational effects on the individual are less clear. For instance, Gill's (2009) analysis shows that rankings can create fear, anxiety, shame, and feelings of out-of-placeness. On the one hand, such reactions internalize rankings into everyday work routines fostering organizational change. On the other hand, such responses raise a variety of ethical challenges: Do rankings create unjustified inequality, both among business schools and their staff? Do rankings call for moral compromises (e.g., between 'playing the game' and remain true to oneself)? Answering questions like these would improve our knowledge about business school rankings in significant ways.

Understanding and theorizing rankings' continued relevance to the field of management education as resting on disciplinary control implies a shift in emphasis. Rankings not only 'matter' because they provide business schools with an important and highly visible source of legitimacy (Dahlin-Brown, 2005), but also because they shape individuals' dispositions toward work and themselves.

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TABLES

Table 1 –Selected Criteria Used by Major International Rankings

	Employability	Incoming Class	School/Program Features	Research
<i>The Economist</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • salary change (pre-MBA to post-MBA)/ salary • percentage of graduates in new jobs after graduation • percentage of graduates with jobs through career service 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • average GMAT score • average length of work experience • percentage of women students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ratio of registered alumni to current students • student rating of programme content • number of overseas countries with alumni 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • percentage of faculty with PhDs
<i>BusinessWeek</i> (Global Full-Time MBA)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • effectiveness of career services • usefulness of skills • usefulness of networks • value for money • contacts to businesses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘caliber’ of class 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • teaching quality • teaching material • work load • technological tools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • intellectual capital score (calculated based on publications in a list of 20 journals)
<i>Wall Street Journal</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • recruitment experience • value for money of recruitment effort • skills and abilities of graduates • likelihood of recruiter return 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • student characteristics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • career services office • overall satisfaction with a school • faculty expertise 	
<i>Financial Times</i> (Global Full-Time MBA)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • salary change (pre-MBA to post-MBA)/ post-MBA salary • graduates employed within three months time • value for money (incl. fees vs. salary and length) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • gender diversity of incoming students • international diversity of students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • gender diversity of faculty • international diversity of faculty • international exposure during the program 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • percentage of papers in 45 journals within three years time • percentage of faculty with PhDs • number of doctoral graduates over three years

Note: This overview does not reflect a complete list of all ranking criteria. Note that some of the publishers do not publicly display their exact ranking criteria, but only refer to general categories (e.g., ‘effectiveness of career services’). The table is based on the criteria reported by the different publishers on their respective websites as well as data reported in Wedlin (2007: 29).

Table 2 – Disciplinary Effects of Business School Rankings

	General Description	Rankings Discipline by...	Objectifying Effects on...
Hierarchical Observation	Surveillance of individuals' performance	Visibility	Individual (through self-monitoring and separation)
Normalizing Judgment	Definition of behavioral expectations	Commensuration	Individual (through creating classifications)
Examination	Observation of normalized judgment	Subjectification	Individual (through altered self-understanding)