Constructing a Legitimate History: Crisis, Legitimacy, and the Atlantic Schools of Business Conferences

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Introduction
The first conference of the Atlantic Schools of Business (ASB) took place in 1970 and the most recent in 2007. As such, ASB is one of the longest running conferences of business scholars in Canada (Mills, 2005). For its first 34 years, various universities in Atlantic Canada hosted the conference without the structure of an organizing committee. Therefore, unlike similar conferences held by the Administrative Sciences Association of Canada (ASAC) or the Academy of Management (AoM), the ASB conferences have distributed organizational responsibilities among participating universities. However, there are now signs this informal system of organization is breaking down (Mills, 2005). In response, ASB has created an executive and embarked on a program of organizational renewal. The long history of ASB as an informal organization makes the sudden decision to adopt formal structures somewhat puzzling. This puzzle provides a unique opportunity to gain insight into the construction, formalization, and legitimization of an organization.

In this paper, we adopted a critical stance to examine this puzzle through three interrelated approaches. First, we conducted a review of archival material from the organization of the conferences. Through this review, the context and process of formalization was uncovered. Second, the ASB membership was surveyed and analyzed through the interpretive lens of critical hermeneutics. In these surveys, individuals were asked to write mission statements for the ASB in order to understand how the purpose of this institution has been variously conceptualized. Finally, interviews were conducted with key individuals in the ASB renewal process. These interviews examined how members of the ASB executive rationalized their decision to formalize. To begin this investigation, the broader history and context of academic business conferences will be explored which will in turn develop the theoretical framework for an analysis of the ASB.

The History of ASB: The effect of isomorphism
Dellheim (1986) pointed out that internal and external relationships are important in developing organizational history and for understanding why some organizations succeed where others are prematurely extinguished. An historical account of the ASB can highlight the processes, procedures and influences that have shaped the organization and contributed to its longevity. For the ASB, the internal environment was one of uncertainty as the process of re-
creating the conference each year was left open to the institution that would volunteer to host the conference. Further, interest in the conference was decreasing (Mills, 2005) thus putting into question the future of the conference. At the same time, increasing adherence to standards and accreditation dominated management education and research in Canada.

The conference began in 1970 without the formality of an organizational structure, but strong ties developed between the ASB conference and ASAC. This is evidenced by the articles regarding the ASB being printed in the ASAC E-Bulletin (for example, May 2002 and Spring 2006). Archival documents for the conference are limited to conference proceedings, a partially complete database of locations, dates, streams and presenters, and two boxes which contained the documents related to the organizing and hosting of the conference in 1996. Although limited to documents from 1996, an exploration of this archival evidence provided insight into the intentional modeling of ASB on the ASAC conferences. Copies of the ASAC brochures and conference proceedings with notes regarding the utilization of these items for developing the artifacts of the ASB conference clearly demonstrated the effects of mimetic isomorphism.

Isomorphism, as described by DiMaggio and Powell (1983), is the tendency for groups of organizations within an institutional field to move towards homogeneity. An institutional field is a collection of inter-related firms such as competitors, suppliers, customers and other organizations that are linked together and “constitute a recognized area of institutional life” (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983: 148). DiMaggio and Powell (1983) described three processes of isomorphic change for organizations: coercive isomorphism, which will put pressure upon a dependent organization to take on a similar structure to a dominant organization; mimetic isomorphism, which will drive organizations in an environment of uncertainty towards homogeneity with an organization that is deemed successful, and; normative isomorphism, which will push organizations towards similarity in order to facilitate legitimacy.

External to the ASB, the growth of accreditation of business schools was occurring on a global scale through the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB). Although the members of the AACSB were dominated by American universities, the association was gaining members from around the world. In 1994, only two Canadian universities (Alberta and Calgary) were members of the AACSB, and a study was conducted that showed most Canadian universities were opposed to the concept of the AACSB as well as the cost of membership (Austin, 2000). However, by 1999, seven Canadian Universities were members of the AACSB (Alberta, Calgary, Concordia, Laval, Manitoba, Queen’s and Toronto), and by 2007, this number had increased to seventeen. The three Atlantic province members were some of the most recent to join: Memorial University gained accreditation in 2002 and both Dalhousie and Saint Mary’s posted their accreditation notifications in 2004. The growing acceptance of AACSB as a standard for management education has resulted in a more formalized environment within which the ASB recruits researchers and practitioners for its conferences. In other words, a more formalized environment produced significant isomorphic pressure to adhere to the commonly accepted standards: this trend of replication is a significant example of mimetic isomorphism. Our
historical analysis of the formation and existence of the ASB does not simply tell a story of adhering to mimetic pressures. This paper will now build the argument that the ASB was subject to normative isomorphism as it implemented a formal structure in 2005 in order to gain legitimacy in the field which would foster long-term survival.

Seeking legitimacy

Legitimacy is sought through rationalized formal structures and the “elements of formal structure are manifestations of powerful institutional rules which function as highly rationalized myths that are binding on particular organizations” (Meyer and Rowan, 1977: 343). These myths are shared beliefs within an organization that specify what is appropriate or legitimate (Prasad & Prasad, 1994) and include ideologies such as professionalism (Prasad and Prasad, 1994) and standardization (Olshan, 1993).

Therefore, in order for an organization to gain legitimacy, it must adapt to the commonly accepted ideals. The perception of legitimacy has been shown to have a direct effect on the survivability of an organization (Rao, 1994). “The mere existence of certain institutional structures can increase the legitimacy of compliant firms” (Standifird and Weinstein, 2002: 145). With the future of the ASB in jeopardy, it is not surprising that change was implemented and replication of successful structures of organizations within the institutional field adopted. In an attempt to reverse the trend of decreasing interest in the conference, the ASB conference sought to portray an image of legitimacy and long-term viability. Mills (2005) echoed the comments of Milne and Patten (2002) that organizations are able to foster legitimacy through communication of institutionalized structures and processes that correspond with an industry’s socially accepted norms to external constituents. The norm accepted by the management education and research industry is one of formalized structure. By adopting this norm, the ASB succumbed to the normative isomorphic pressures.

We understand the relevant socio-historical context as primarily concerned with enhancing the legitimacy of management education, and academic conferences are recognized as having a high level of utility toward this end of improving the quality and quantity of internally generated management knowledge. Through the forces of institutionalization, new actors that are introduced into this context experience the typified behaviours they observe as social norms (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). It is perhaps inevitable that the ASB, being a socially constructed institution of a particular kind – a management association – should through the forces of isomorphism, develop a homogeneity of structure and purpose with other like institutions, coming to resemble each other over time through the adoption of legitimated practices (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). The creation and longevity of the ASB is thus partially understood as a venue for management scholarship that contributes to the professionalization of the discipline and the legitimacy of the business schools in the region.

The paper now turns to an examination of how these processes played out within the ASB through both a survey and interviews with individuals in the organization. The insights offered extend beyond the boundaries of the ASB; much is uncovered about the academic climate within the Atlantic business school community, representing the formative context in which the ASB evolved. These findings provide evidence of isomorphic and legitimizing tendencies. We will begin by examining how the purpose of ASB has been
conceptualized through an interpretive analysis of mission statements generated for this institution by its membership.

Mission statements: Evidence of legitimizing tendencies

Of all the forms of corporate communications, “a mission statement is probably the most ubiquitous” (Fox, 2006: 3). Nonetheless, its meaning can be quite varied, and may refer to a broad variety of statements that seek to communicate vision, values and organizational purpose, only the latter of which is the proper meaning of the term ‘mission’ (Fairhurst, Jordan and Neuwirth, 1997). Insofar as mission statements can condition how actors internal and external to an organization make sense of that organization, than this one statement plays a critical role in the creation of an organization with the particular preferred meanings and powers ascribed to it by those so privileged to do so (Phillips and Brown, 1993). As a result, mission statements are “the instruments of culture, managerial ethos, and ideology” (Fairhurst et al., 1997: 244). An analysis of mission statements drafted for the ASB should offer an opportunity to explore both the expressed purposes and the veiled meanings symbolically referred to in the text. One should be mindful of the relevant contextual factors that were explored earlier in this paper; these will help to explain the forces that contributed to shaping these statements, and the degree of convergence arrived at by the disparate respondents.

The methodological framework employed in this examination is critical hermeneutics, as this is appropriate to achieve our twofold goal of systematically interpreting the meaning of the texts and explaining how these specific texts came into being (Thompson, 1981). The hermeneutic approach to analyzing mission statements generated by ASB members is consistent with our philosophical lens of phenomenology, in which interpretation is key to understanding any experience of any reality, since all texts contain the subjective meaning of their authors (Prasad, 2005). For any form of communication to be effectively comprehended, it must rely upon some form of “shared code or convention (for example, the English language) with which meaningful objects and actions can be produced and interpreted” (Phillips and Brown, 1993: 1550). This is what Ricoeur (1971) refers to as ‘appropriation’, allowing textual analysis to lose its arbitrariness in the hermeneutic examination of how a text’s formal structure is employed to convey a particular meaning within a social context. Since language is the medium of intersubjectivity, the mediator between competing frames of reference, language remains central to this process of understanding (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). Furthermore, hermeneutics unpacks the original meanings and intentions of social constructions through an attempt to locate the broader rules that contributed to the construction of specific texts (Helms Mills and Mills, 2000; Thompson, 1981). It is a “phenomenological fact that there is always a context that serves to anchor the text in our actual living and to allow it to have a decidable meaning” (Madison, 1988: 114, original emphasis). Hermeneutics is therefore concerned with two interpretive phases in this methodology of social science that occur iteratively to shape one another: the formal understanding of the text itself, including its structure and signifying functions, and an understanding of the broader social and historical context in which the text arose (Phillips and Brown, 1993; Ricoeur, 1971; Thompson, 1981).

Having completed the prescribed analysis of content and context, the social scientist
following a hermeneutic methodology is encouraged to finish the task through a synthesis of both. The process of interpretation is not “the acquiring of information about what is understood; it is rather the working-out of possibilities projected in understanding” (Heidegger, 1962: 189). The act of interpretation is to move beyond the overt meaning of the text to unveil its symbolic meaning, one not originally intended by the author (Prasad and Mir, 2002). At this moment, hermeneutic analysis proceeds with some uncertainty (Phillips and Brown, 1993). Rigor is established to the extent that, “although there are many possible interpretations, some are closer to a true understanding of the role of a given text in the ongoing creation and maintenance of a set of social relations” (Phillips and Brown, 1993: 1555). In the end, the hermeneutic circle becomes closed when we understand how the formative context determined the specific content of a text and how the text in turn contributed to maintaining the predominant rules within the larger context (Prasad and Mir, 2002). Critical hermeneutics extends this analysis by addressing “questions of power, ideology and history” (Thompson, 1981: 5) to look at the conditions that enable a text to carry a particular understanding of the world. For Habermas, “all texts are products of traditions embodying wider social relations of power and domination” (Prasad, 2005: 34). As a result, texts can reinforce the privileges that the powerful enjoy (Prasad and Mir, 2002). Critical hermeneutics offers insights into asymmetrical patterns of social relations that are useful for investigating how texts are employed in the management of meaning and in the legitimation of particular activities and (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Phillips and Brown, 1993).

**Data collection and analytical methods**

A pre-existing mailing list used to distribute the Call for Papers for ASB conferences was used to send an email to the entire population. Participants were asked to respond to the following single open-ended question:

A mission statement is used to communicate an organization’s purpose and sense of direction to stakeholders. The ASB currently does not have such an artifact, nor is there necessarily any desire for it to have one. Nevertheless, I am interested in what your version of a mission statement for the ASB would be… Furthermore, to address any response bias [of attendees versus non-attendees], I am also interested in the kind of ASB that would guarantee your interest in attending. To the extent that this is different from your current version, then two separate statements would be required.

In this question, a meaning for ‘mission statement’ was constructed that was limited to ‘purpose and sense of direction.’ The confidentiality of all respondents was assured, even though they could be personally identified by one of the authors as the mission statements were received in the form of returned emails. As an incentive to respond, a gift certificate to an on-line retailer valuing $100 was offered, and delivered, to one randomly selected respondent. Seventeen separate responses were received, sixteen of which contained a statement (or series of statements) approximating a mission, and the respondents represented three provinces, five universities and six campuses.
With respect to the mechanics of interpreting texts from the perspective of critical hermeneutics, the process essentially separates each of the ‘interpretive moments’ (Phillips and Brown, 1993) of hermeneutics earlier identified into separate analytical steps. The first step is the formal analysis of the text language, structure and symbolism “according to any textual method that appeals to the researcher” (Prasad and Mir, 2002: 97). Second is the analysis of the context out of which the text has arisen, which may include social, historical, cultural, industrial and other relevant contextual factors. Finally, “there is an analytic moment where textual interpretation is produced through the … relationship between what the researcher considers the abstracted meaning of the text and what she or he has foregrounded as the anchored context in which the text was produced” (Prasad and Mir, 2002: 97). It should also be noted that the excerpts from the mission statements that follow have been edited for spelling and grammar in as minimal a manner as necessary; the responses to the request were returned by email, so some proper writing conventions were loosely applied.

Understanding the Text
Since the primary reason an organization would create a mission statement is to document its purpose, most of the authors of the ASB mission statements completed a phrase similar to ‘Our mission is to …’ with a verb and object. A dominant theme that emerged was the construction of an ASB that contributed to the quality of research being conducted within Atlantic Canada. Six of the mission statements completed the previous sentence with the following: ‘to enhance the quality and scope of research’; ‘to celebrate, share and enhance the quality of business research’; ‘to encourage, enhance, and disseminate knowledge of research and teaching activities’; ‘to produce high quality conversations’; ‘to develop and encourage business academic research excellence’, and ‘to encourage and support world-class organizational scholarship.’ A further four respondents suggested that the ASB should aspire to a similar such purpose (‘to promote and foster excellence in academic research’, ‘to engage in high quality research and exchange of ideas’, ‘to improve research capacity’, and ‘to promote excellence in the teaching, research and practice of management’), but conceptualized the ASB currently in an inferior light, such as simply an outlet for research produced locally and faculty socialization. Thus, from a thematic reading of the texts (see Prasad and Mir, 2002) almost two-thirds of the mission statements for the ASB spoke to the quality and excellence of research that this conference should seek to showcase. For five others, the ASB was conceptualized as fulfilling various other purposes, including advancing teaching, showcasing student research, collaborating with the business community and, from a business school perspective, providing local academics with an ‘opportunity to discuss academic and administrative issues of common interest’.

Within these, however, there remained an implied notion of quality and excellence insofar as the ASB should ‘enhance’ and ‘facilitate advances’ toward ‘the continuing advancement of knowledge and post-secondary education in the region’ and ‘the overall growth and success of business education.’ The remaining respondent suggested a focus shift away from ‘research contributions and innovation in teaching’ toward discussions on ‘the nature of work and organizations [to promote] the betterment of humankind’.

In addition to a statement of purpose found within the ASB mission statements, the analysis also addressed to the extent
available the important question: for whom does the ASB serve such a purpose? With respect to membership, twelve of the statements contained no specific limitation on who is, or may be, a member and/or present research, and tended to refer simply to ‘academics’ or ‘researchers’. Without any such qualifications, it may be implied that all business school faculty are served by the ASB regardless of rank or tenure. A further two suggested that the ASB serves ‘beginning and established researchers’ or ‘junior and senior researchers alike’. Only two of the statements suggested a narrower audience targeted toward junior academics, ‘in particular those who are in the early-to-mid stages of their research agendas’. With respect to the geographic scope of the ASB, all but one of the mission statements suggested that the ASB consisted of, and served the interests of, academics in Atlantic Canada (including one statement which simply made reference to ‘the region’). The remaining statement contained no geographic reference. Two of these statements contained a qualification that the focus on Atlantic Canada was primary but ‘not limited to’ or with ‘membership open to all’. A further two respondents broadened their geographic scope when shifting from the current to the idealized mission, with the ASB ideally operating ‘on the Atlantic Seaboard’ or ‘on an international basis’. By combining this explicit focus on the Atlantic with the preceding emphasis on quality and excellence (particularly in research activities), the formal understanding of the texts suggests a desire to highlight particularly attractive features of being an academic at any career stage within this part of Canada, insofar as one would be situated within a community of excellence.

**Understanding the context**

In all phenomenological efforts to understand the processes of subjective reality construction, consideration of social dimensions becomes necessary, as subjectivity is actually limited by the cognitive schema and language we obtain from our wider societies (Prasad, 2005). The second step in the application of critical hermeneutics to the ASB mission statements is, therefore, an analysis of the broader context of business school academia along a socio-historical dimension. The most relevant dynamic reflected in these texts that contributed to how the ASB has been constructed is the legitimacy of business school education, as has been discussed at length earlier in this paper.

The texts of the ASB mission statements provided by the respondents in this study contained scant reference to a diminished role for the ASB. Quite the contrary, the texts clearly emphasized notions of quality and excellence, particularly with respect to research activities. This raises a second relevant socio-historical factor reflected in these texts, namely, the geographic specificity of the ASB conference and the social conditions pertaining to Atlantic Canadian universities. Business schools in the Atlantic provinces, more so than in other locations, are negatively impacted by issues with staff recruitment and retention. We could speculate that the small town, sometimes rural setting of many of the Atlantic universities, the maritime climate, the overall state of the economy, proximity to more populous regions, and other factors could contribute to this problem; the generally below national average compensation paid to university professors is, however, most certainly a relevant factor. Within this context, business schools in the Atlantic Provinces may feel more pressure than others to manage their image as places where substantial amounts of quality research are accomplished. Since this is a uniquely Atlantic context, this may help
explain why the ASB is a uniquely Atlantic institution without parallel in other Canadian regions. In this competitive environment for excellence amongst faculty (and the research dollars that often follow them), the Atlantic Provinces may be understandably in need of constructing an institution to perform a valuable self-promotion function.

**Interpretation**

The emphasis on scholarly achievement contained within the ASB mission statement texts symbolizes the contribution to these broader goals that continues to be made possible by this institution. At an even more symbolic level, the desire to construct the ASB as a showcase for research excellence by members at all stages in their career signifies an attractiveness of business schools in this region for academics. As a result, those already within these institutions are encouraged to stay while academics new to the region are invited to investigate further.

Based on the analysis, the hermeneutic circle can now be closed. The purpose of the ASB as expressed in the mission statements has been shaped by the contextual desire to enhance the professional legitimacy of management education through scholarship. In turn, the texts contribute to the idea that scholarship is the route to legitimacy and the ASB in particular is a vehicle through which this purpose is achieved. Additionally, the respondents constructed an ASB that reflects the competitive nature of the faculty recruitment environment and simultaneously contributes to the idea that we must participate in this competition. The mission statement texts are indeed much more than simply statements of purpose and have become, through this analysis, something else entirely. These nuanced observations only became available through the hermeneutic interpretation of the texts and their context, for while the context determines the content, the content simultaneously maintains and reinforces the dominant narratives (Prasad and Mir, 2002).

**The case for not creating a mission statement for ASB**

A caution against creating an actual mission statement for the ASB was offered by the sole respondent who did not return a mission statement. Instead, advice was given to not ‘develop a mission statement that makes it look like something that will in the end kill it’. As stated earlier, the forces of mimetic and normative isomorphism will ensure that any socially constructed institution bears resemblances of that which already exists and is deemed legitimate. This may place pressures upon any author of an ASB mission statement to rely upon the dominant ideology that management conferences should contribute to the professionalization of the discipline through quality research that contributes to a body of knowledge for management. Indeed, this was the case for the majority of the participants in this project. The threat this may pose to the ASB is threefold. First, as the lone respondent identified, other ‘conferences already exist’ to fulfill such purposes, and perhaps there is not an audience that requires an additional presentation venue. Second, by creating a single statement of purpose for the ASB, immediately lost are all of the other competing definitions that are no longer privileged. A critical reading of the mission statements for the ASB provided by the respondents highlights the dominant ideology of competition, superiority and legitimacy. Management scholars within the ASB become powerful and legitimated within an ASB that is constructed in a manner that serves themselves. The ASB may, however, currently serve its members in a host of ways not represented by the dominant ideology. Indeed, one respondent
wants an ASB that ‘encourages collegial interaction’ while another desires to see the ASB contribute ‘to the betterment of humankind’. The threat to the ASB, therefore, is that a single mission statement may make this institution irrelevant to the multitude of members who each attach their own meaning to it.

Finally, there is something unique in an ASB that has maintained itself as an organization according to Ward’s (1988) theory of spontaneous order. Ward’s (1988: 28) theory is that “given a common need, a collection of people will, by trial and error, by improvisation and experiment, evolve order out of the situation – this order being more durable and more closely related to their needs than any kind of externally imposed authority could provide.” The ASB is a fine example of a “society held together by the cement of human solidarity alone, without the dead weight of power and authority” (Ward, 1988: 35). The imposition of such a constricting structure as a mission statement could limit the freedom of ASB members to naturally respond to whatever common need may exist at the time. The ASB may very well owe its success and longevity to its historical disorganization. Despite success in reaching their immediate goals, members of informal organizations such as ASB seem plagued by their inability to become ‘organized’ and often worry about the existence of their organization as a reification of their initial intentions (Kelley, Lune and Murphy, 2005). Institutional isomorphism and legitimization is one avenue to formalization (Deephouse and Carter, 2005), enabling the introduction of formal structures in the hopes of ensuring organizational survival. This organizational angst has seemingly not been felt by ASB until recently, and this unveils a puzzle that should add to the understanding of isomorphism and legitimization.

Experiences in the legitimization and formalization process of the ASB

Since the formalization of ASB has only recently happened, and the actors involved in that transformation are still part of the organization, there is a unique opportunity to capture the subjective experiences of the actors involved in the formalization as they can provide insight into how formalization occurs. This paper now seeks to understand the subjective experience of these individuals and the construction of their narratives (Eisenhardt, 1989) in the decision to formalize. Multiple data sources were used: archival material in the form of conference proceedings, records of conference organizing committees, and interviews with key individuals in the newly formalized ASB executive.

The introductory statements from the proceedings of ASB conferences were reviewed from 1981 to 2006. In all, there were 14 years of conference proceedings available. The introductory statements were content analyzed and categories were derived that emerged from the statements. One of the more striking features evident from the proceedings is the process of looking backwards and borrowing somewhat manifest through statements such as "followed the lead of last year’s conference", "seeks to expand upon what has gone on in the past", “ASB has continued to encourage research... continues to serve its goal”, “like all successful conferences that came before us.” It seems as though conference organizers took their cues from what happened in previous years with each proceedings acting as a signpost of past actions. In this way, the informal organization attempted to reproduce itself on an annual basis, and suggests the concept of continuity. It also suggests that a process of internal isomorphism is taking place; that is,
it models itself not on external organizations, but on previous ASB conferences. It is only in 2006 that the retrospective nature of the proceedings seems to come to an end: in this case, the site of next year’s conference is mentioned. This forward-looking perspective is not evident in any other year of proceedings available in the archives.

The proceedings also make references to the increasing or improved quality of the papers or program. One reference is made to program sponsors who “believed enough in our efforts to support the Atlantic Schools of Business.” This suggests efforts at legitimizing the conference. Legitimization efforts are also made by referring to support from the Deans of business schools, and through a suggestion that the conference can “contribute to long term prosperity in Atlantic Canada.” In other words, those with existing legitimacy have supported the conference, and the conference has the ability to produce tangible results that will positively affect the region.

The notion of the collective nature of the conference is also evident from the proceedings. Phrases such as the “conference is truly a joint effort”, and in references to the conference as belonging to the group, or being formed by the group. Related to this is the idea that the region in which the conference takes place somehow places the participants in ASB in a larger collective: that of the region of Atlantic Canada. This is evidenced through statements such as “colleagues throughout the region”, “challenges that we face [in Atlantic Canada]”, and “the conference will contribute to long term prosperity in Atlantic Canada.” Related to this is the notion of collegiality: that the conference is more than just about presenting papers, that it is a venue for friendship and enjoyment.

The idea that ASB is a long-running conference only appears in proceedings beginning in 2001. This suggests the emergence of organizational myth (Meyer and Rowan, 1977), and distinguishes ASB as a unique entity. Although the myth of longest-running conference does emerge in 2001, it is with some uncertainty: in the following year, as the conference is referred to as “one” of the “longest-running conferences for business academics”. Perhaps, it is suggested, there may be other conferences that can lay claim to this title.

Initial categories were formulated from the archival material, but in-depth understanding of the meaning of these categories was obtained from the point of view of those involved in the formalization process; that is, the executive of the ASB. Interview questions involved eliciting members’ responses about their involvement with ASB, comparison of ASB pre- and post-formalization, and their experiences with the formalization process. These questions were informed by the results of reviewing the archival proceedings and the resulting initial categories that were revealed, namely, isomorphism, legitimacy, uniqueness, continuity, and mythology. Many of these categories were seen again in the interview with the three ASB executive members who responded to the interview request. For example, one respondent noted that ASB conferences were conducted “in the spirit of collegiality” and that people organized the conference “for love, collegiality, charity, personal interest...” When asked directly whether the conference could be considered a collective, a respondent replied that there may be a core element of the group that is a collective but that the larger conference, when it occurs annually, “probably is seen more as a collective, there are chairs from all over Atlantic Canada, the same people in the
same streams revisit each other." What appeared to emerge from the interviews is that the traditional ways of perpetuating the collective sense of ASB are being replaced by methods that are similar to other academic conferences; in other words, ASB is becoming more like other conferences. This institutional isomorphism emerges with an interesting twist because of ideas of organizational legitimacy, or what one respondent in the interviews called reputation. The respondent noted that “ASB had a vast amount of potential and its biggest single problem was its reputation or lack thereof.”

This legitimacy problem could be rectified by becoming isomorphic to other conferences, in this case to make it more like ASAC or the AoM. At the same time, the respondent stressed that there are unique and undervalued aspects of ASB that make it not that much different from these same conferences and organizations. So formalization must take place with the hope that it will be done “in such a way [so as] to preserve ASB.” In other words, ASB must change to become like other conferences, but it must retain something of its original character. This would include retaining its collegial character by, for example, not roasting graduate students over the flame when presenting papers. Its legitimacy as an organization is intricately tied into making it distinct from other conferences, yet requires it to be like other conferences.

New categories were also suggested by the interviews. These included the notion that the doctoral program at Saint Mary’s University was a significant driver for ASB’s formalization. There is a requirement for doctoral students to produce papers and to get experience in presenting at a conference and two characteristics of ASB not noted in the interview that make it attractive for this purpose: the geographic accessibility of ASB, and its non-threatening environment in which students can present research. One interview highlighted that “the environment was amenable [for doctoral students]...because it was not the equivalent of the AoM [Academy of Management] when you were liable to get some expert in the audience roast you over a flame...” The fear, however, was that “ASB almost came to a point of collapse” and the benefit to doctoral students and management education would be lost. The idea that a crisis point had been reached in ASB is evident from the interview, and so crisis becomes another category within this study. But, what were the factors that contributed to this crisis?

Several reasons were offered for the impending collapse of the ASB in the interviews. First was the 33rd ASB conference in 2003 which two interviewees noted as having “the lowest turnout of any ASB in living memory” and that the business school deans were less willing to fund and support the conferences. It must be noted, though, that this perception is doubted in one interview: the comment about “living memory” points to the inability to confirm that this particular low turnout was the only time that it occurred. It raises the possibility that the perception of crisis may have been attenuated if it had been recorded that ASB had survived previous events with low turnouts. Despite the doubt surrounding the pivotal low turnout event, a second factor in the creation of the crisis was offered: the tightening of resources by sponsor universities, and a change in attitude towards sponsorship by universities. Meeting rooms and related facilities and services were no longer donated in-kind and now had to be paid for by ASB. Again, ASB may have in the past weathered these kinds of financial burdens.
A third and more nuanced explanation for impending collapse involving the ontological status of ASB as a formal or informal organization became evident from the interviews. As one respondent put it, “ASB had nothing. It didn’t even have a physical home in the sense that you couldn’t even point to a building and say that’s whatever... So it was really an organization that lacked 99.999 percent of anything that we attribute to organizations.” The lack of formal organizational trappings meant that “people had to constantly kind of reinvent the thing every year on sort of an informal basis.” ASB had “always been achieved collectively by acts of giving” and so its existence by continual reinvention depended upon goodwill and upon the force of individual personalities. The informal nature of ASB meant that there was a lack of institutional memory, which in turn made the reproduction of conferences difficult, especially when the influence and involvement of individual personalities involved in ASB began to wane: “the biggest problem... wasn’t the lack of buildings or trappings it was the lack of... corporate memory.” The interview refers to the “traditional” nature of ASB that “perpetuates [it]... that makes it look like an organization.” Therefore, the survival of ASB as a traditional or informal organization is dependent upon the goodwill of one or more individuals, together with the support of power embodied in the Deans of business schools making up ASB. The crisis, therefore, was a failure in one or more of the elements that came together to reproduce the conference on an informal basis. The perception of crisis affected the ASB along the same trajectory as isomorphic pressures to become more legitimate. The adoption of formal structural elements was one method of alleviating this crisis.

Conclusion
The evolution of organizational theory reveals a history not of progress toward greater elucidation and clarity or toward more humane forms of organization, but of continuing extension and integration of techniques of control (Ferguson, 1984: 62-63). The struggle for the ASB can be seen as a series of legitimization efforts beginning with management education and moving on to management research. In Canada, management education was initially focused in Ontario in the late 1800s (Boothman, 2000), followed by the replication of management education programs in the Maritimes between the First and Second World War (Boothman, 2000). This progression is mirrored in the development of ASAC in 1957 and its pursuit of legitimacy (Austin, 2000), followed by the emergence of the ASB conference in 1970 and its subsequent legitimacy issues. While first pressured by mimetic tendencies, it was the normative pressures of accreditation, standardization, and formalization that eventually caused the ASB to abandon its unique non-structure within the field of management research for a formalized structure that might enable the conference to continue offering a venue for research in the Atlantic Provinces. Manifestations of these pressures came in the form of mission statements for the ASB that constructed this organization as an instrument that would enhance the reputation of management scholarship within the Atlantic Provinces. By doing so, the survey respondents were influenced by the dominant ideology of professionalization and, through isomorphic pressures, constructed the ASB in a manner that reflects a context in which the presentation of quality research at conferences is an important route toward credibility and legitimacy. The responses received can also be understood as being shaped by a competitive environment in
which faculty recruitment and retention are placing pressures on business schools to be perceived as centres of research excellence. Critical hermeneutics further highlighted how the texts themselves contribute to maintaining these dominant narratives of research quality and excellence, creating a circular relationship between the texts and their context. Any effort to narrowly specify the purpose of the ASB will, however, inevitably exclude alternative possibilities. For the ASB to continue to be inclusive, participants should be encouraged to attach their own meaning to their participation in this institution and through negotiation and consensus allow the ASB to evolve to meet their changing needs. This was certainly the case for the first 34 years of the organization, as the archival data and results from the interview reveals an organization that cannot be easily defined. The evidence from the archives and the interviews suggest that ASB considered itself an informal organization, or even a collective. In sum, the story of ASB involves the perpetuation of a crisis and numerous references to isomorphism and legitimacy. All these concepts are intertwined with the end result being the formalization of ASB. How can this story and its results be understood? Bartunek (1984) suggested a starting point: decisions to restructure organizations are based on the interpretive schemes of powerful organizational members. These schemes are shared, fundamental and often implicit ideas about why things happen and result in a particular organizational ordering. Organizational structures change if the interpretive schemes change, and these changes occur through crisis. Seen in this way, the formative context of legitimacy and the development of a crisis in ASB takes its place in the organizational restructuring. The implicit interpretive scheme pre-crisis was that of informal organization and constant reinvention of the ASB on an annual basis. Post-crisis, the interpretive scheme was that of practical utility of formal structure, based on the necessities of research, recruitment, sponsorship and the ease of organization.

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