

Consultancy's Consequences? A Critical Assessment of Management Consultancy's Impact on Management

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Much is claimed of management consultancy by critics and celebrants alike. Through shaping and legitimizing ideas and catalysing change, it has impacted on management practice and people's lives more generally. Given the growth of consultancy as an industry and wider activity, few have challenged these views. However, there are good reasons for treating them with some caution. In particular, its impact is exaggerated in geographical scope and confused with that of management ideas in general – consultancy as a scapegoat for management. At the same time, recent changes in both the nature and status of management and of consultancy have rendered traditional boundary distinctions less tenable such that the scope and impact of consultancy may be even greater than is typically assumed. Overall, its impact has been both understated and overstated. I therefore argue for a more cautious and critical approach. This recognizes consultancy as an integral part of management, where its distinctive role lies more in its structural position and ambiguous visibility and accountability than its practices, skills or occupational/professional identity claims. The research agenda thus becomes one of more clearly identifying the consequences of management as well as of consultancy, in part through a consideration of contexts where they are, or were, largely absent.

Introduction

For the last 20 years or so, management consultancy has been a source of some fascination for managers, business journalists and academics. Its apparently spectacular growth and presence in and around the elites of business and government and beyond have prompted grand claims of its impact and provoked both criticisms and defences of its practice. These tend to be based upon the management ideas and organizational reforms associated with consultancy interven-

tions – their quality and impact – as well as the position of consultancy as 'independent' or 'unaccountable'. For example, at a broad level, consultants are seen as key agents and symbols of contemporary social change. In Thrift's account of 'soft' or 'knowing' capitalism, management consultancy is a key 'generator and distributor of new knowledge ... a vital part of the cultural circuit of capital' – consultants as 'capitalism's commissars' (2005, pp. 35–36, 93; also Sennett, 2006). Similarly, in government contexts, what has been termed 'consultocracy' has emerged. Here, 'consultants have become powerful because ... the new managerialist model that they advocate tends to remove public administration from politics and thus from public scrutiny' (Saint-Martin, 2004, p. 20). More generally, Fincham and Clark note how 'few people, whether in their roles as employees or as citizens,

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will have avoided the effects of some kind of consultancy-led initiative' such that management consultancy has 'had an impact on the developing character of modern organisations and ... contributed to millions of people having to adjust to new ways of working' (2002, p. 1) and, it might be added, of thinking (O'Mahoney, 2010, p. 2).

Such impacts are claimed by the industry itself to be the source of considerable economic value – of around ten times (and up to 20 times) the fees charged, which in the UK are approximately £10 billion per annum (Management Consultancies Association (MCA), 2010).¹ Supporters also identify more qualitative outcomes such as helping to develop creativity and achieve radical organizational innovation or the 'disruption of dominant orders' (Clegg *et al.*, 2004, p. 36). Others are, of course, more critical. For example, consultancy has long been associated with securing efficiencies through job losses so that, for client organizations, 'a significant percentage of the staff soon find that their services are surplus to requirements' (Craig and Brooks, 2006, p. 106), although the extent to which this is the case is debated (Armbrüster and Gluckler, 2007). More bluntly, Grint and Case suggest that in certain contexts 'the consultant's briefcase harbours the managerial equivalent of the great white shark?' (1998, p. 560). Another long-standing critique is concerned not solely with material or ideational outcomes but how they are achieved – consultancy's apparently non-legitimate or opaque influence on decision making in the corporate world (e.g. Enron and audit-consultancy links) and government. Here, it is claimed that democratic or rational processes are bypassed through elite personal relationships and exchanges of roles as civil servants, politicians and executives move in and out of senior consulting positions (Craig and Brooks, 2006; Jones, 2003; Nader, 1976). Finally, the impact of consultancy is seen by many to be significant, in large part because of the way in which expertise is successfully directed towards selling or impression management rather than solving client

problems (Alvesson, 2004; Clark, 1995). As one practitioner-critic suggested, 'simply put, consulting is at its most organised, intimidating best when it is working to maximise its take from the client. Its key vulnerabilities, on the other hand, are rooted in using some of the most impressive people in the world to do too many questionable things too fast' (Pinault, 2001, p. 2).

Regardless of which side of the fence they are on, then, both popular and academic commentators seem largely to agree that management consultants and the ideas they purvey are highly significant. They 'exert such enormous influence on the modern world' (McKenna, 2006, p. 7) and '... the impact they have had on clients, their employees, and society at large *cannot be denied*' (O'Mahoney, 2010, p. 2, emphasis added). It is, in fact, taken for granted. But how confident can we be of the claims made of consultancy? For example, can we simply equate the impact of management consultancy with that of the ideas it is associated with? Where do we draw the boundary between consultancy and other actors and influences, not least management more generally? How far does consultancy serve as a scapegoat for management? Is the spread of consultancy truly global? This is not to suggest that consultancy has not had significant impacts in particular contexts. Rather, the main aim of this paper is to explore such questions in order to generate a more considered view and debate about its likely influence on management.

For the most part, the following account is based on a review of academic, practitioner and popular literature, including ongoing and previous research I have been involved with personally (e.g. Sturdy, 1997a, 2009; Sturdy, Schwarz and Spicer, 2006; Sturdy, Wylie and Wright, forthcoming; Sturdy *et al.*, 2009). It is structured as follows. First, some of the claimed impacts of management consultancy on management are briefly outlined before the main focus – the various factors which suggest that some caution is needed in interpreting or accepting many of the claims made of consultancy. Here, some methodological difficulties and flaws in research are initially raised. This draws attention to more general problems arising from the ambiguity of consultancy such as scapegoating. These are then explored further in considering contemporary developments whereby the partial boundaries between consultancy and management practices are blurring – *management as consultancy* and *consultancy as*

¹The industry body in the UK, the Management Consultancies Association, recently conducted a study to calculate the value of UK management consultancy. On the basis of levels of client satisfaction and client estimates of approximate economic returns on fees paid, it estimated a value of approximately £6 for every £1 of fees paid, around £60 billion (see also critique below).

management. This leads to a concluding discussion of where we might best focus our research attention on the consequences of consultancy and management more generally.

The impacts of consultancy on management – a summary

We have already seen how the impact of management consultancy is held to extend across almost all elements of society. The focus in this section (and the remainder of the paper) is more limited – the effect on the practices and language of management, not just of consulting clients, but of other managers and those in related occupations (e.g. executives and professionals). The concern will also mostly be with *direct* impacts rather than those achieved indirectly through the media, financial actors/owners and management academics for example. Clearly, such a topic could still form the basis of an entire paper or even a much larger study. However, given the focus here on questioning the bases of the claims made, as much as their content, the following represents merely an overview or summary. Nevertheless, and as we shall see, there have been few systematic attempts to chart the consequences of management consultancy.

Although often neglected, there is considerable variation within management consultancy such as differences between large firms and sole practitioners and internals and externals (e.g. Alvesson and Johansson, 2002; Richter and Niewiem, 2009; Wright, 2009). Consultancy's impacts such as 'knowledge transfer' are also likely to vary by project and consultancy type or role, especially between the now quite rare form of pure 'process' consultancy and the more expert-oriented and rationalistic approaches (Caldwell, 2003; Schein, 1969). Nevertheless, there are some common and familiar uses made of management consultancy which provide the basis of a useful initial framework for considering its impact in general. In particular, Tisdall (1982) identified consultancy as providing expertise, extra staff and the facilitation of organizational change. To this we should add the often less formal but widely recognized role of legitimizing knowledge and decisions (McKenna, 2006). Such uses broadly and respectively conform to what Czerniawska more recently labelled 'perspective,

people, process and politics' (MCA, 2006). These activities mostly relate to consulting projects and are explicitly client focused. However, it is also important to recognize that much management consultancy activity occurs at the margins of projects and beyond them and is also explicitly directed towards generating and maintaining consultancy business. In particular, consultancy involves the largely backstage activity of the research and development (R&D) of products and services – 'commodification' (Anand, Gardner and Morris, 2007; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2001). In addition, the promotion of services occurs in a variety of ways, informally and through 'thought leadership' (e.g. surveys and articles), bidding for work and joint ventures with business schools and other firms/actors (Legge, Sullivan-Taylor and Wilson, 2007). Finally, consulting can achieve influence from the status it has achieved from its growth and success as an industry – as an approach to emulate – and through recruitment of its staff into (and from) other sectors (Sturdy and Wright, 2008). All these activities – offering expertise, extra staff, facilitation of change and legitimation to clients as well as non-project-specific work such as R&D and promotion – can be seen to have varying impacts on management, which are summarized in Table 1. There is no scope to discuss these in detail here. Moreover, there is no shortage of accounts making specific claims for consultancy. However, it is important to stress their frequently speculative nature for, as we shall see in the following sections, not only has there been very little systematic research on the impact of consultancy, but such a task is extremely problematic.

Reasons to be cautious – methodology, ambiguity and moving boundaries

Having set out some of the grand claims made of management consultancy in general, and then outlined some more considered possibilities for its impact on management specifically, we now turn to our main focus, a critical assessment of the bases of such claims. In particular, even if we dismiss positivist aspirations towards establishing causality in an objective sense and pursue instead a more modest realist aim of demonstrating influence or generative mechanisms with some plausibility, problems still immediately arise.

Table 1. The activities of management consultancy and its claimed impacts on management

Consultancy activity	Impacts on management
Expertise (perspective) • Management ideas and frameworks • Process (e.g. change and project management methods)	• Provides (largely western, neoliberal, modernist) language and focus for organizational reform (e.g. Marsh, 2008; Salaman, 2002), i.e. helps set management/policy agendas and outcomes ('successful' or otherwise) (e.g. Sturdy, 1997b) • Reinforces particular approaches to change management (e.g. methods-/project-driven) (e.g. Caldwell, 2003; Klat-Smith, 2010) and the idea of an imperative of change (e.g. Sturdy and Grey, 2003) • Silences/excludes other forms of organizing and changing (e.g. public policy and professions) (e.g. Saint-Martin, 2004; Wright, 2008) • 'Professionalizes' or formalizes management knowledge (e.g. Fincham, 2006; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2001)
Extras (people)	• Provides resource to implement change (e.g. MCA, 2010); boosts status of commissioning clients as employer of 'grey labour' (e.g. Alvesson and Johansson, 2002); limits numbers and prospects of line management (e.g. Fincham, 2003)
Facilitates change (process)	• Encourages inter-functional management dialogue and integrated change (e.g. MCA, 2010); helps secure executive control over client management groups (e.g. Sturdy, Wylie and Wright, 2010) • Helps ensure projects are progressed – catalyst (e.g. MCA, 2010; Schein, 1969)
Legitimation (politics) • Outsider and/or expert status helps legitimate ideas and decisions (e.g. rationalizations)	• Reinforces authority of commissioning client and helps ensure ideas and practices (see expertise above) are legitimated and enacted (e.g. Ramsay, 1996) • Undermines authority and expertise of other management/expert groups (Menon and Pfeffer, 2003) • Shapes/signals image of client organization to stakeholders and others (e.g. managers in sector) (e.g. Armbrüster, 2006; Bergh and Gibbons, 2011)
Non-project-specific work • Product development (e.g. commodification, research and joint ventures) • Promotion (marketing services, relationship building and 'thought leadership') • Consulting industry profile/success • Recruitment	• Commodification of ideas simplifies and/or translates them which helps knowledge flow/awareness, but might affect quality – 'mere rhetoric' (e.g. Suddaby and Greenwood, 2001; Werr, 2002) • Joint ventures with firms and business schools for R&D and education shape nature and flow of management ideas (e.g. content of MBAs) (Legge, Sullivan-Taylor and Wilson, 2007) • Promotion (e.g. 'thought leadership') can serve to legitimate management in general and/or consultants as management experts (cf. managers, business schools, professions) (e.g. Engwall, Furusten and Wallerstedt, 2002) • Back-stage promotion/networking can bypass resistance and/or undermine more transparent or alternative forms of agenda setting and decision making and/or can generate resentment (e.g. Jones, 2003; Saint-Martin, 2004; Sturdy, Schwarz and Spicer, 2006) • Consultancy business needs for new products reinforces turnover of management ideas and intensifies change and performance imperatives (e.g. Kieser, 2002) • Seeking 'sell on' in projects can generate anti-consultancy sentiment and provoke more controlling/professional purchasing practices and/or help develop longer-term client relations (e.g. Kitay and Wright, 2004; Werr and Perner, 2007) • Profile and success of industry legitimates consultancy knowledge, skills, culture and careers in organizations, management functions (e.g. accounting and human resource management) (Greenwood, Suddaby and Hinings, 2002; Wright, 2008), education (e.g. MBA, the case study) (Khurana, 2007) and the media. Success also provokes some resentment or backlash to consultancy ideas and culture (e.g. supporting work-life balance) (Whittle, 2005) • Recruitment processes into, and from, consulting promote consulting/management ideas and mentalities (e.g. change methods and imperative) among work organizations (private, public and third sectors) and business schools (e.g. Craig and Brooks, 2006; Sturdy and Wright, 2008)

These are discussed under two closely related headings before discussing their wider implications for a research agenda. First, we point to problems with the research to date, some of which are familiar and quite general, whereas others are more specific to consultancy and its ambiguous nature. Ambiguity continues into the second area of difficulty – the diffuse and changing boundaries between consultancy and management in a more general sense.

Methodology and ambiguity

Partial geographical coverage and impact. Despite the now huge quantity of research on consultancy, we still know relatively little of its practices in detail (cf. de Jong and van Eekelen, 1999). As was once the case with research on managers, most studies continue to rely on interviews and pay little attention to detailed activities (cf. Mintzberg, 1973), not least because they are often politically sensitive and difficult to access (Sturdy *et al.*, 2009). Needless to say, such neglect creates problems for identifying the precise impacts of consultancy (see Sturdy (forthcoming) for a review of empirical areas of neglect in consulting literature). However, a much more significant issue, and one which has barely received attention, is the neglect of consultancy in geographical contexts where it is, or has been, less common (cf. Chen *et al.*, 2011; Wright and Kwon, 2006). In itself, such concentration is not necessarily problematic. However, it has led to exaggerated claims of the scope of consultancy's impact.

As we have seen, consultancy is often presented as a global phenomenon and certainly, as McKenna claims, as being 'deeply embedded in all of the developed economies' (McKenna, 2006, p. xiii). Indeed, partly as a consequence of the need to respond to the needs of multinational clients and to take advantage of economic changes in different regions, international consulting firms have offices spread widely (Boussebaa, 2009; Jones, 2003). Furthermore, their influence is likely to extend beyond that of their particular office locations. However, beyond considering the role of consultancy in multinational corporations and international 'development' (Gow, 1991; Kostera, 1995), what is its role and impact elsewhere? A partial indicator of activity is fee income where around 82% derives

from North America (USA and Canada) (49%) and the European Union (33%) (Gross and Poor, 2008). Within Europe as a whole, 92% of business and IT consulting revenues come from only three countries (Germany, 47%; UK, 31%; France, 14%) (FEACO, 2009).² Together then, approximately 80% of consultancy fees worldwide are generated in only five nations. Notwithstanding a likely impact beyond fee earning projects, such figures clearly suggest that consultancy is by no means omnipresent, even within the developed world.

The variable use or non-use of consultancy in different countries is poorly researched although there are some indications of cultural and institutional conditions favouring the use of other sources of advice and knowledge such as social networks (Kipping and Wright, forthcoming; O'Mahoney, 2010). Similar arguments can be made around sectors and even firms which have actively or otherwise chosen *not* to use management consultancy. Again, however, research on this topic is almost non-existent. Indeed, the assumption is often that consultancy use is 'now pervasive throughout all types of business and industries' (Bergh and Gibbons, 2011, p. 562). In short, then, caution is required over the geographical and sectoral scope of management consultancy, even before trying to establish its specific effects.

Cause and effect?. The most ostensibly systematic attempts at establishing the outcomes of consultancy come, unsurprisingly, from the industry itself, keen to overcome criticism and even stigma and assert its positive role. Here, as noted earlier, the MCA (2010) in the UK recently calculated the impact based on the assessments of those who commissioned consultants of what multiple of the fee the work generated as a return. This is obviously not a robust approach, not least because the respondents had a clear stake in a positive outcome and because there is no indication that such assessments were based on anything other than guesswork (see also below). Overall, however, there is 'little systematic evaluative evidence' (Wood, 2002, p. 205; also Bergh and Gibbons, 2011). This is perhaps

²Denmark, Spain, Austria, Sweden and Finland are also relatively large users as a percentage of GDP (FEACO, 2009).

unsurprising, as it is widely recognized that consultancy projects are especially difficult to assess, not least because they are typically a joint activity carried out with clients rather than simply a report delivered to them (see Ernst and Kieser, 2002; cf. Gable, 1996). Indeed, the relative difficulty of evaluating quality in a largely ambiguous activity such as consulting or establishing liability for faults has been seen as a key factor limiting the emergence of a more developed or closed form of a profession (Gross and Kieser, 2006; McKenna, 2008) as well as the charging of fees based on results.

Moving to a more general level, another problem of identifying impact and its scope is that of separating out the influence of consultancy from other activities, including those which are also touched by consultancy (Wood, 2002). For example, Thrift sees consultants as only one element of his notion of the 'cultural circuit of capitalism', along with business schools, management gurus and the media, and does little to differentiate the impact of each. Other obvious influences on management which might be confused with (and connected to) that of consultancy might include management and professional networks; academic ideas (e.g. Porter's five forces, agency theory) (Khurana, 2007); the rise of project working and post-bureaucracy more generally (Grey, 1999; Hodgson, 2004); and the emergence of shareholder value/investor capitalism (Beer and Nohria, 2000). Indeed, following on from the above discussion, an interesting research task would be to examine management in contexts which have been relatively untouched by consultancy in order to gain an insight on its role where it is dominant. This is clearly not possible in a strict, quasi-experimental sense. However, insights could be gained from sectors and, especially, countries where consultancy has not taken hold or was absent previously.

Conflicting evaluations and interests. Despite the lack of knowledge of its practices and geographical scope and more traditional analytical difficulties of establishing and isolating patterns of influence, it could be argued that 'consultants are probably the most evaluated people in the working world' (Stewart, 2009, p. 145). Aside from employer assessments of individual consultants that often shape an 'up or out' career trajectory, for example, there are numerous

anecdotal accounts of the outcomes of specific consulting projects. Here, there are cases where efficiencies were gained by clients or ideas were successfully resisted by them as 'alien' for example (e.g. Kipping and Armbrüster, 2002). Indeed, popular accounts and practitioner exposés are filled with such stories (e.g. O'Shea and Madigan, 1997). Here again, the ambiguity of consultancy (combined with the frequent political sensitivity of its practices) renders evaluation of its impact particularly problematic or, more specifically, subject to considerable variation and contestation.

Both quantitative and qualitative research has identified variation in assessment at the level of the consulting project. For example, an industry survey (MCA, 2006) found client satisfaction levels much higher among those involved in commissioning the use of consultants (48%) as opposed to client project managers (28%) and, in particular, end-users (17%) and those seconded onto a project (11%).³ This phenomenon is probably best illustrated in a written survey response from a senior manager cited in Sturdy (1997a): 'I like working with consultants (provided that they report to me and not my boss!!)' (see also Alvesson *et al.*, 2009). Clearly, much can lie behind varying assessments, including the possibility of an agreement on the nature of the impact but conflicting views on the quality of the consultants' performance or its desirability. Indeed, they suggest some scope for tension between consultancy and management rather than them being mutually reinforcing or complementary. This does not simply relate to the potential threat that consultants pose to individual client managers' identities as experts or to their job content or security (Sturdy, 1997b). The ideas promoted by consultants can present a more widespread challenge to management. As Salaman argues: 'consultancy ideas authorize and enable senior management to reinvent themselves as responsible for and capable of redesigning the organization' (Salaman, 2002, p. 255). However, and as the above quote from a manager suggests, emphasis should be placed on 'senior management', for many of the ideas championed by consultancy in recent years, notably de-layering and shareholder value, have undermined traditional notions of managerialism (Khurana, 2007;

³These figures compare with a recent MCA survey (2010) claiming a 99% client satisfaction rate (58% 'very satisfied' and 41% 'satisfied').

Scarbrough and Burrell, 1996). All this highlights how the nature of the impact of consultancy is crucially determined by the interests of the commissioning clients – consultants as the agent's agent (Fincham, 2003) – and its extent is shaped by contestation, even within management ranks. Such a context is fuelled by the practice of scapegoating, to which we now turn.

Scapegoating. Much as the use of consultants by clients to legitimate management ideas and decisions is acknowledged and yet largely informal (cf. McKenna, 2006), so too is the related practice of scapegoating, i.e. placing more blame/responsibility than is warranted on consultants for decisions, ideas and practices such as those associated with work intensification and rationalization. Scapegoating in organizations generally is commonplace, but typically directed at those in less powerful positions (see Jackall, 1988). In this case, it is consultants' 'outsider' status which is significant as well as their expert identity and formal role as advisors combined, once again, with the ambiguity of their work and of responsibility for action. Indeed, consultants commonly expect to be blamed for politically sensitive reforms, as part of their fee – 'traders in trouble' (Alvesson and Johansson, 2002). Scapegoating can serve as a means of diverting resistance away from client management. This can also be seen to occur at a broader level where popular media and academic criticisms of consultants substitute for a more direct challenge to their clients, to management. It is easier, more 'sayable', to blame and caricature consultants as a relatively highly paid, high status and small group than it is to present alternative approaches to management and innovation (Sturdy, 2009).

It is necessarily difficult to demonstrate scapegoating, especially given the ambiguity of management knowledge. However, it is clear that much research making claims of consultancy equates it with the ideas it promotes (e.g. Fincham and Clark, 2002; O'Mahoney, 2010; Salaman, 2002). It is as if the success of the consultancy industry can be assumed to derive from success in producing and introducing new ideas. As Ramsay noted of large consulting firms, they 'now wield an immense and international power . . . Their scale, fees and growth indicate the acceleration of faddism itself, and suggest the importance of their role therein' (Ramsay, 1996,

p. 166). Such views are partial, first in that they understate the significance of the role of consultancy in simply legitimating and implementing existing ideas – as grey labour – in favour of seeing it as responsible for bringing new ideas to clients, as innovators. As will be argued below, the novelty to managers of consulting ideas has waned in recent years (Sturdy *et al.*, 2009). Second, and as already noted, management ideas derive from a variety of sources and processes of which consultants are only one, albeit an important one in some contexts. It is for this reason that, in general, studies of particular management ideas do not tend to dwell upon the role of consultants. It is more that research on consultants extends their significance to match the ideas they are associated with. However, and third, it is possible that such views actually understate the role of consultancy in that they tend to associate it with those working in consulting firms or sole practitioners. As the following two sections show, consultancy extends well beyond this, such that the diffuse boundaries between consultancy and the rest of management pose another challenge for identifying its impacts.

Moving boundaries – management as consultancy, consultancy as management

In order to assess the impact of management consultancy, it is important to clarify its nature and boundaries. We have seen how this poses problems in relation to separating out the effects of other influences such as education and the media. However, it is especially important when we are concerned with the relationship between management consultancy and management, not least in order to establish the direction of any influence. For example, it is often observed how the ideas promoted by consultants are typically first developed by managers and other employees in client organizations (Ramsay, 1996). Likewise, management has long shaped consultancy more generally by defining its areas of business both in terms of the problems its claims to address and its role in doing so (Kipping, 2002; Sturdy, 1997a). However, we have also seen how they can exist in tension, especially in terms of consultancy acting to control middle management and even managerialism. Overall, and as we shall see, the relationship between consultancy and management more

generally is complex, contested and, most importantly, changing, which presents further difficulties in establishing the nature and scope of consultancy's impact.

Definitions of consultancy, as with those of many other occupations, will always be problematic, but are helpful in revealing some of the dynamic and political issues involved by way of processes of inclusion and exclusion. A standard and useful reference here presents two main types of definition (Kubr, 1996, pp. 3–4). The first, often favoured by professional associations, sees management consultancy as a special service where specific qualifications or skills and training are required to identify and analyse client problems and recommend solutions 'in an objective and independent manner'. Such a view is largely in keeping with the idea or identity of consultancy as a 'distinctive occupation' (Kitay and Wright, 2007, p. 1615) compared with management. Here, consultancy knowledge is seen as largely different in form (abstract and theoretical) and alien to that of managers; consultants are specialists and advisors in organizational change which is only of periodic concern to managers whose focus is on its implementation (Armbrüster and Kipping, 2002); and consultants also have the cultural trappings or cosmopolitan identity of other professionals. Although such a view might be considered a rather traditional one, it conforms to contemporary definitions used in the UK public sector, for example, which distinguish consultancy from 'steady state' activities and those of interim managers and outsourcing (OGC, 2006).

The second main definition is a more inclusive one and is derived largely from humanistic and process consultancy traditions. It emphasizes the practice of providing assistance towards organizational improvement such that *we can all be consultants* in particular contexts, regardless of our main occupation. 'Thus a manager can also act as a consultant if he or she decides to give advice and help to a fellow manager, or even to subordinates rather than directing them or issuing orders to them' (Kubr, 1996, p. 3). This clearly contradicts the first, excluding definition even if, in practice, both views coexist and can be selectively drawn upon. Indeed, such tensions are evident elsewhere within management occupations such as human resource management (Guest, 1987) and project management (Hodgson, 2002) as well as management itself – 'we are

all managers now' (Grey, 1999). The situation is further complicated by changes in the sector and in management more generally. As Fincham and Clark (2002, p. 2) note, 'no sooner are the limits of the industry identified or the composition of consultancy skills articulated than these factors (unique tasks, skills and firms) become redundant because the nature of consultancy work has shifted'. Indeed, as the following argues, there are indications that management and management consultancy are becoming less distinct, but not precisely in the sense or spirit of the second definition with its focus on the *process* tradition of consultancy. Indeed, process consultancy appears to be redefining itself as explicitly distinct from management consultancy, as 'business coaching' (Clegg, Rhodes and Kornberger, 2007; cf. Butler, 2010).

Management as consultancy. As part of a number of changes associated with the emergence of post-bureaucratic and enterprise discourses, management can be seen to have changed in a way in which it now more clearly resembles management consultancy. In particular, organizational change has become a more explicit imperative and line management activity in recent years to the extent that it has become less of a specialism (Sturdy and Grey, 2003). Likewise, formal and structured approaches to organizational reforms and their management are more familiar to managers, thanks in part to the massive growth of formal management education, but also to the recruitment of former external consultants into line management positions (Sturdy and Wright, 2008). In addition, project working and project management has extended well beyond its early homes of engineering and IT for example – 'projectification' (Hodgson, 2002). As Grey observed over ten years ago of the emerging manager:

In place of the 'organization man' of corporate hierarchies emerges a new stereotype [of managers]: the brash ... high flyer, adept with the language of MBA programmes and big league consultants, parachuting from one change assignment to the next. (Grey, 1999, p. 574)⁴

⁴See also Kitay and Wright's identity rhetorics of consultants which compare with contemporary, enterprise-based views of managers (2007).

To such developments, we might add a more speculative change in management, that of the growth of more 'non-hierarchical', service or advisory forms of relating between manager and subordinate, rendering the former more like a consultant or similar service provider (George, 1990; cf. Hales, 2002).

A more explicit reshaping of management into consultancy is evident in the way in which consultancy discourse has been appropriated by various management occupations and professions over the years. This is most obvious in the case of accounting where the large firms and others such as internal auditors actively and extensively diversified into consultancy services (Greenwood, Suddaby and Hinings, 2002; Selim, Woodward and Allegrini, 2009). Similarly, human resource management in particular has sought to adopt a consultancy label or model as part of its bid for higher status and impact as 'business partners' (Wright, 2008). Management consultancy has also become associated with the development of occupations such as project/programme and interim management (Hodgson, 2002; O'Mahoney, 2010). More generally, as management has become more commonplace or less exclusive, some have sought the alternative identity of consultants. This is evident in what Khurana (2007) called the 'flight from management' – the shift in the career choices of MBAs towards consultancy jobs, but also within managerial ranks. Here, for some, there is almost a stigma attached to the label of manager as a quote cited in Brocklehurst, Grey and Sturdy (2010, p. 13) suggests: 'I describe myself as a consultant rather than a manager. You say "I am a manager" and people say "urrr ... so what". But you say you are a consultant, [then] that's an interesting thing.'

Even if, as we shall see shortly, this is not a universally held view, it highlights the potentially diffuse nature of the consultant–manager boundary currently. This is also evident in terms of institutions where, in the UK, the professional body of management consultants is part of a wider institute of management (Chartered Management Institute) and has relaunched itself as the 'Institute of Consulting' (as opposed to 'Management' or 'Business' consultancy) in recognition of the extent to which consultancy has diffused into other manage-

ment occupational groups.⁵ Overall, then, the extension of consultancy as a discourse into mainstream management can be taken to represent an additional impact of consultancy and/or an increased scope of consultancy itself. Indeed, if we consider the above developments in management occupations alongside the consultancy carried out by sole practitioners and internal consultants (Wylie, Sturdy and Wright, 2010), it could be argued that more management consultancy occurs outside of consulting firms than within them, not least when consulting services comprise only 42% of firms' business in terms of fee income (cf. outsourcing at 37% and IT consulting and development at 21%) (MCA, 2006). Given that almost all the literature on management consultancy is focused on the activities of firms and their consultants, the impact of consultancy is likely to be even greater than that suggested, but once again the research base is absent.

Consultancy as management. The problem posed for identifying the impact of consultancy by the appropriation or assimilation of consultancy practices into management and its occupational groups is exacerbated by changes in consultancy itself (as exclusively defined), which in some respects appears to be moving closer to management, or at least some traditional distinctions are more difficult to draw. First, partly in response to client criticism, consultants have become increasingly involved in implementing change as well as related advisory services (Morris, 2000; Sturdy, 1997a). This was once thought of as more the domain of internal consultants (Armbrüster, 2006; cf. Wylie, Sturdy and Wright, 2010) but is now included as part of conventional external consultancy classifications (e.g. OGC, 2006). Likewise, although strictly the province of interim management, we have seen how a standard use of consultants is as extra 'pairs of hands' or 'body shops', as a reserve army of line management rather than expert advisors. Another development,

⁵In formal terms, at least according to the UK system of the Standard Occupational Classification, this has long been the case in the sense that management consultants have not existed as a separate occupational category but have been included within their functional specialism such as human resources or information technology (Fincham, forthcoming).

and again partly in response to client criticisms, has been the recruitment of experienced managers into some areas of consultancy, in favour of appointing new graduates or MBAs for example (O'Mahoney, 2010). This has the effect of further breaking down the distinctions between client managers and consultants on project teams for example (Sturdy *et al.*, 2009). Finally, in certain contexts, an explicit and distinctive consultancy identity is being played down or becoming less prominent or visible. Here, rather than people aspiring to be consultants or explicitly appropriating their discourse, as above, it is the stigma of the occupation which is taking effect. We have already noted this in relation to how coaching is defining itself in opposition to mainstream consulting (Clegg, Rhodes and Kornberger, 2007), but it is evident more widely. In internal consultancy, for example, alternative departmental labels are sometimes used such as 'business transformation', 'business improvement' or 'change delivery', partly as a result of senior managerial scepticism over the role and value of external management consultants. This is reflected in the following quote from an internal consultant.

One of the directors ... reacted quite sharply if we talked about ourselves as consultants. To him consultants were basically people who tried to charge him money and who he was never convinced were great value. (Sturdy, Wylie and Wright, 2010)

Such views are perhaps unsurprising in that, as we have seen, the rise of consultancy has provoked as much criticism and scepticism as it has celebration among managers. What is more novel are claims from within the world of external consultancy that the term 'consulting' may be under threat. This is currently only an emerging topic of speculation, but a recent 'blog' – 'What's in a name?' – written by one of the UK's leading industry commentators (and also spokesperson for the MCA) sets out some of the concerns. Here, the confusion over whether consultancy includes implementation of organizational change and over the growing role of accounting firms in consultancy combines with the occupation's stigma.

All of which results in a compelling argument for finding a term to replace the confused and discredited 'consulting'. There was a rumour a year or so ago that McKinsey were going to rebadge

their consultants 'knowledge purveyors': entirely spurious, I'm sure, but a sign of the times nonetheless ... Consultants may be deluding themselves into thinking that it's the badge people distrust: it may, of course, be consulting itself. (Czerniawska, 2010)

Whether or not consulting is moving into some form of identity crisis, for our purposes the point is to show how its distinctiveness from other parts of management is eroding in contemporary discourse as a result of a number of different developments. In one sense, and echoing that claimed of management more generally, it could be said that its success has been at the expense of its exclusivity, in the UK at least (Grey, 1999; cf. Butler, 2010), but we have seen how it is not simply a case of consultancy colonizing management as a whole. There have been moves in the opposite direction as well and other developments which together make consultancy and its impact on management difficult to establish.

Discussion and research agenda

Even if we dismiss the grandest claims made of management consultancy, it is clear that it has had some significant effects on management in particular contexts. These effects were identified in relation to the principal uses made of consultancy (as experts, extras, facilitators and legitimators) as well as non-project-specific activities such as R&D and promotion. In particular, consultancy has been seen to shape, formalize, commodify and legitimize both the nature and methods of organizational change, as well as to complement and integrate management ranks and deflect critiques directed towards them. Such consequences are largely familiar, taken for granted even, and have rarely been scrutinized. It is as if the high profile and continued growth of consultancy equates precisely with a high and global impact. This is possible, but a range of reasons have been presented to suggest that some caution is warranted in making and assessing claims for the impact of consultancy on management more generally.

Some of these reasons point to the possibility of a more restricted impact than is often claimed such as revealing the geographical concentration of consultancy business and how the occupation is often used as a scapegoat for management/

executive actions and equated with the management ideas which others also create, legitimate and implement. Indeed, there are many other influences on management and management ideas which are sometimes only indirectly related to consultancy and almost always are difficult to distinguish without detailed research, which is sorely lacking. Other reasons presented for the need for greater caution suggest that the impact of consultancy might actually be greater than is typically understood, not least because internal consultancy and the role of sole practitioners have been relatively neglected. In addition and more significantly, we have seen how both the practice and, in some cases, the explicit identity of consultancy have been appropriated by management and related occupations in broader moves towards post-bureaucratic and strategic discourses. This extension of management consultancy reinforces the more inclusive view of the occupation and further extends the scope of its impact. Consultancy has not simply shaped the form and methods of organizational change then, but management practice more generally. At the same time, we have seen how the practices and character of external consultancy have become more like those traditionally associated with management, through recruitment for example and even discarding the sometimes confusing and stigmatized consultancy label. While consultancy has always been a kind of management, in parallel, the hopes of those pursuing the project of a distinctive or closed profession or occupation certainly appear to have been dashed as boundaries have become even more diffuse. Such an identity is, at least, less 'sayable' now than it was (Alvesson and Johansson, 2002).

Overall, then, we can conclude that we do not currently have an adequate basis on which to make claims about the impact of management consultancy either generally or specifically upon management. Surprisingly, given the growth in the academic study of consultancy over the last 20 years or so, this is partly a consequence of an inadequate research base (Sturdy, forthcoming).⁶ In particular, there is a distinct lack of comparative and historical research which explores conditions where consultancy is/was not used,

including where it is actively rejected. This does not simply refer to firms, sectors or national or cultural contexts, but to explicit alternatives to consultancy as a means of innovation, change management and legitimation for example. Except perhaps in the case of internal and external consultancy, management consultancy is rarely explored comparatively. Such research could surely shed some new light on its impact as well as its potential alternatives. Of course, in contemporary contexts, this is made more difficult by the apparent merging of management and consultancy outlined above.

One implication of this development is to focus research on the more distinctive features of management consultancy. Three particular areas illustrate varying levels of distinctiveness. First, the above discussion has been more or less concerned with a particular rationalistic, expert-based and dominant approach to consultancy which has largely seen off the competition of process consultancy (Caldwell, 2003; Clegg, Rhodes and Kornberger, 2007) and rendered marginal and neglected those working in different traditions such as 'feminist consulting' (e.g. Marsh, 2008). Second, although overlapping with the practices of other actors, including management, the development and promotion of management ideas in consultancy is often different in its scale and still under-researched (cf. Heusinkveld and Benders, 2005). How, for example, does the development of management ideas vary between contexts when they are promoted by consulting firms or other actors? Third, one of the most distinctive features of consultants is their 'outsider' relationship to the client. While they may share many practices, skills and even occupational/professional identity claims, consultants typically lack the formal responsibility and accountability of managers for organizational reforms. This relationship has been explored in some detail with regard to management knowledge – its legitimation and 'otherness' (McKenna, 2006; Sturdy *et al.*, 2009) – but less so in terms of the broader question of governance or what Sennett described as the 'divorce between command and accountability' in organizations (Sennett, 2006, p. 70). In what ways does this 'social distance' affect organizational reforms, their nature and progress? To such questions might be added concerns over policy such as who should be responsible and visibly so in changing

⁶The idea of value more generally has been neglected in organization studies in favour of 'relations of power and meaning' (Prichard and Mir, 2010, p. 507).

organizations and even nations (Craig and Brooks, 2006; Khurana, 2007).

Focusing on these more distinctive features of consultancy would help in better revealing some of its impacts, but this implies neglecting many of the key activities of consultancy. Of course, given its increasingly close relationship to management, an alternative approach would be to discard the distinction altogether and raise similar questions about management overall. Here, too, there has been insufficient research attention given to revealing its impact. Again, particular insight could be gained by considering it in relation to its alternatives or absence even if this is a more difficult challenge empirically than doing so with consultancy which remains relatively concentrated. Nevertheless, studies of competing logics to management such as those of the professions as well as more radical alternatives and historical work pointing to different forms of organizing could be fruitful. Furthermore, they would encourage us to de-naturalize what is currently a dominant form of governing. This is also needed in the case of consultancy in specific contexts where research has almost exclusively occurred in a period of industry growth which, by definition, cannot continue indefinitely (Sturdy, Wylie and Wright, forthcoming).

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