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POPULAR CRITIQUES OF CONSULTANCY AND A POLITICS OF MANAGEMENT LEARNING?

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Abstract

In this short article, I argue that popular business discourse on the role of management consultancy in the promotion and translation of management ideas is often critical, informed by more or less implicit ethical and political concerns with employee security, equity, openness and the transparency and legitimacy of responsibility. These concerns are, in part, 'sayable' because their object is seen as a scapegoat for management. Nevertheless, combined with the popular form of their expression, they can support and legitimise critical studies of management learning, a discipline which otherwise has become overly concerned with processual and situational phenomena at the expense of broader political dynamics and the content and consequences of management and management knowledge.

Introduction

Given the managerial emphasis on the role of bringing new knowledge into organisations from the outside (Anand et al, 2002), one might imagine that studies of management consultancy lie at the heart of the field of management learning. Consultants are placed by managerial and critical studies alike at the forefront of knowledge mediation - the 'generator and distributor of new knowledge.....capitalism's commissars' (Thrift, 2005:35; 93). Surprisingly however, there are relatively few accounts focusing on knowledge flow processes through consultancy and these typically attend to consultants' expert role more than their role in legitimating existing knowledge.

These studies draw on some of the basics of management learning in pointing to the simultaneous strength consultants gain from 'weak ties' with their clients combined with the problem of outsider status or the '*burden of otherness*' which their knowledge is seen to represent to clients (e.g. Kipping and Armbrüster, 2002; Antal and Krebsbach-Gnath, 2001; c.f. Sturdy et al, 2004). Such research could benefit much more from the field of management learning by, for example, recognising different levels of 'otherness' or adopting a more processual and situated view of knowledge (Handley et al, 2007). But my concern here is how, if at all, might an understanding of management consultancy work in the other direction and contribute to the discipline of management learning? I suggest one possible and unconventional route, which may help to address a lack of criticality in the current core of management learning.

The processual and situational nature of knowledge has become dominant in the field of management learning. As intimated above, this is to be welcomed in that it provides valuable insights and correctives to earlier approaches such as cognitive and behavioural views. However, this and related contemporary preoccupations with flux and flow in specific contexts has served to deflect attention from more widespread, political and structural concerns, in fact, from management and capitalism. In particular, it has led to a neglect of the content, continuity (i.e. lack of novelty) and broader consequences of management knowledge which, outside of learning debates, is seen as reflecting various shifting forms of control and subordination for example (Barley and Kunda, 1993; Jacques, 1996). Admittedly, within management learning and this journal especially, critical perspectives are evident, reflected in challenges to the dominant assumptions that management knowledge is a 'good thing' and that we should make learning it easier or better (Contu et al, 2003; Coopey, 1995). Likewise, others point to ideological and material dimensions of learning in organisations such as patterns of exclusion (Contu

and Willmott, 2003). But such critical accounts and the issues they raise remain largely at the periphery. However, *there is* a broader, more popular business discourse which engages with management learning critically in the form of critiques of management consultancy. In the following, I argue that the moral and political concerns expressed or implicit in popular critical discourses about management consultancy can provide grounds for a broader and more popular critical debate around management learning as well as enrich and politicise the academic study of consultancy itself.

Popular critiques of management consultancy

Business discourse in general has, of course, grown in recent decades. As regards more popular discourses of management consultancy specifically, these have a reasonably long heritage in relation to periodic controversies over unethical conduct (McKenna, 2006) and consultants' opaque enrolment in public administration (Saint-Martin, 2004). These continue, but have been supplemented by other issues and concerns in the business sections of the popular press as well as journalistic and autobiographical accounts found in airport lounge book stalls. Such increased attention relates to the massive growth of consultancy activity in many key economies and to associations of consultancy with power, influence, wealth and, rightly or wrongly, prestige. The activities of the large consulting firms at least have become linked with a new elite occupation and an increasingly popular career aspiration for MBA and other graduates (Karreman and Rylander, 2008). Given this, it is perhaps, unsurprising that alongside celebratory accounts (often scripted by the industry and its representatives), much of this discourse appears to be critical or, at least, sceptical. Thus, popular critiques seek to burst the bubble of consultancy through the reproduction of jokes, exposes of 'sharp practices' and, in the public sector sphere at least, constant questioning of the cost and value of consulting use. While such accounts might be dismissed as being based on

scapegoating, envy and/or stigmatisation rather than more sober analysis (and this indeed is one of the expressed frustrations of the industry), they should not be so readily discarded. In particular, they reflect and reproduce a rare, if somewhat muted and projected, popular critique of management ideas and processes which is not anything like as evident in relation to popular discourses of management (cf Parker, 2002). I shall now outline these critiques and the concerns implicit in them before briefly exploring what this might imply for an agenda for the field of management learning.

Probably the most common popular association of consultancy is that of rationalisers – cutting firms and jobs regardless of the immediate consequences for those concerned. This is a dominant theme in O'Shea and Madigan's (1998) journalistic study of consultancy, but also in autobiographical exposes of the world of consulting (Craig, 2005; Pinault, 2001). What lies behind these accounts is a moral concern about both the ends and means of consultancy and its use by management. A less common critique in Western contexts, but evident in the business press elsewhere, is the portrayal of consultants as ideologues or neo-imperialists, spreading white, masculine, North American rational ideas to alien contexts. Here, the underlying concern is more explicit – the integrity (and utility) of the local (see also O'Reilly, 1987). More generally consultancy is often criticised as a waste of valuable resources either in the sense of simply being used as a comfort blanket, to legitimate existing ideas and plans – the ideas lack novelty - or because their ideas lack substance, especially when it comes to implementation. In the latter case then, the ideas do not rationalise sufficiently. Rather, consultants are simply skilled promoters of new management fads - witchdoctors (Micklewait and Wooldridge, 1996). Implicit in these critiques is some level of concern about fairness of rewards and the importance of openness and, for want of a better word, professionalism. However, a more fundamental and related critique, especially

post-Enron, is that of the lack of accountability or sense of responsibility in consultancy (McKenna, 2006). This is directed as much at commissioning clients as consultants in that there is seen to be insufficient clarity over who is responsible for significant organisational decisions and who should be. In the private sector, the issue is one of who should manage. In Japan for example, the answer is more clearly in favour of the organisational insider than elsewhere. In the public sector, it is about the bypassing of politicians and civil servants in favour of consultant advisers and 'consultocracy' (Saint-Martin, 2004:20). In short, the concern is over transparency of power and legitimacy of responsibility or what Sennett describes as the growth of 'social distance' and 'divorce between command and accountability' in organisations (2006: 57, 70). Finally, other popular criticisms include consultant self-interestedness in the pursuit of new business, as well as being parasitic of clients' ideas and arrogant in their manner. These too imply certain values or concerns such as those of ethical conduct, attribution of due credit and sensitivity towards others (see Table 1).

CRITICISM OF CONSULTANCY	IMPLIED CONCERN
1. Rationalisers	Employee security and means and ends
2. Ideologues/neo-imperialists	Integrity of the local
3. Money wasters (legitimizers)	Fairness in rewards
4. Ideas lack substance or novelty	Openness/professionalism
5. Lack accountability	Transparency of power and legitimacy of responsibility
6. Self-interested, parasitic and arrogant or insensitive	Ethics, ownership or due credit and civility

Table 1 – Popular critiques of consultancy and implied concerns.

What critiques of consultancy mean for management learning

Clearly, such criticisms are highly contested and their empirical validity will vary more or less according to context and perspective. Furthermore, the underlying concerns of the critics are themselves far from unproblematic. For example, the frequent expression of criticism through the medium of put down humour suggests some ambivalence or complicity on the part of the critics (see also Galanter, 2006 on lawyer jokes). Nevertheless, what is of crucial importance here is that these criticisms are much less 'sayable' about management in general, especially in the business press where the readership can be assumed to be mostly managers. In other words, the discourse can be seen as appealing to managers through a form of scapegoating, and it is this which allows the critiques to be voiced in a popular context. But they have a wider relevance than simply the blaming of consultants, especially for the domain of management learning and knowledge. In fact, we can translate the above critiques and their implicit concerns into a range of questions or a critical research agenda for the study of management learning, one which I believe is not adequately addressed through many of the current preoccupations in the field:

1. Rather than focus on management knowledge as a process or on generic categories of knowledge and knowing, what is management knowledge designed for and what are its consequences for various types of actor (eg employees, publics) over time?
2. Whose ideas and values are reflected and dominant in management knowledge and whose are silent?
3. To what extent is legitimation, a core process in management learning and what are the different ways in which this can be organised, recognised and rewarded?

4. If novelty is a relative phenomenon, what does 'innovation' mean in different contexts?
5. How is power distributed in empirical learning contexts and which voices are in-/excluded? How else might or should such processes and responsibility be organised?
6. To what extent and in what ways can learning processes and outcomes be seen as 'ethical' and (as 2 above) whose interests do they reflect?

These concerns are by no means exhaustive and may well raise more questions than answers not least over traditional difficulties with notions such as interests and ethics or with the isolation and attribution of consequences. Furthermore, they are not especially novel. What is of importance however, is the rhetorical potential derived from their relative visibility or 'sayability' in popular or mainstream contexts, notably, the question of who should manage or govern and for whom. They can also be seen to resonate with largely forgotten concerns in the literature as well as emerging ones. For example, the notion of change agency is currently associated with managerialist and consultancy visions of organisational change and development, but once commonly also included the 'application of various pressure tactics, including mass demonstrations, civil disobedience, (and) political organisingagainst government units or businesses' (Tichy, 1975: 774). At the same time, the concerns can be linked to contemporary interest in radical change under the banner of institutional entrepreneurship or variations of political ethics. Finally, old debates can be combined with new developments such as the resurgence of interest in elites with the emergence of newly powerful actors, including consultants (Williams and Savage, 2008). In short, the research agenda suggested by concerns expressed in popular consultancy discourse is by no means isolated from dormant or emergent debates within the academic realm.

Conclusion

The idea of a critical research agenda for management learning having a purchase in popular business discourse as well as links to broader, established and emerging academic concerns should be seen as encouraging for the critical traditions and future prospects of this journal. There is not the scope here to elaborate further on the nature of such research directions, but it is worth concluding with two notes of caution. Firstly and perhaps paradoxically given common assumptions about the relative freedom of academic work, it appears easier to be critical in popular accounts than in academic studies of consultancy. Very few of the latter explore empirically what is examined and claimed in the former (e.g. rationalisation, neo-imperialism, legitimisation and accountability). Thus, the implied research agenda outlined here applies as much to research on consultancy, if not more so, as it does to management learning. Secondly and as already mentioned, the seeming popularity of a critical discourse on consulting is based on a number of specific conditions which render it only partially threatening. In particular, much is expressed in a 'play frame' of humour, like the court jester being allowed to criticise the monarch, or by way of scapegoating. To develop critique of, and within, management learning more effectively will require a departure from this zone and therefore risk losing its anchor in popular discourse. Nevertheless, the fact that ethical and political concerns are more evident in popular consultancy discourse than academic studies of management learning (or consulting) should be both a source of discomfort to us and a spur to develop new political research agendas.

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