

1 The Flow of Management Ideas

Management ideas such as Balanced Scorecard (BSC), Core Competences, Lean Management, Total Quality Management (TQM), Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), Big Data and Agile have received widespread interest from management practitioners and academics alike (Sturdy et al., 2019). This interest may be related to the expansion of management as an ideology and practice in contemporary society, and the important role of a range of traditional management intellectuals (Guillén, 1994) or knowledge entrepreneurs (Clark, 2004a) – which include management gurus, management consultants, business schools and mass media organisations (Abrahamson, 1996; Engwall et al., 2016; Kieser, 1997; Piazza and Abrahamson, 2020; Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall, 2002).

Management ideas are generally presented – mainly via these knowledge entrepreneurs – as an essential guide to management practitioners in performing their tasks, and promote and legitimate the management occupation in general as important for the functioning of contemporary organisations (Sturdy et al., 2019). At the same time, the widespread promotion of these management ideas has led to important questions related to whether these can be considered beneficial or not. Indeed, many of these ideas have been heavily criticised for lacking an adequate scientific basis as well as for possible unfavourable consequences for organisations and their members such as inducing a ‘permanent need for organizational change’ (Sorge and van Witteloostuijn, 2004: 1209), enhancing the likelihood of ‘organizational forgetfulness’ (Brunsson and Olsen, 1997: 41; see also Lammers, 1988) and creating ‘more stressful and intensive’ working conditions (Knights and McCabe, 1998: 163).

In spite of these critiques, management ideas have become widely associated with many, and oftentimes substantial, organisational change programmes (Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999; Strang, 2010), and have a taken-for-granted presence in many textbooks and business school

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curricula. In their recent overview, Piazza and Abrahamson recognised that: ‘managers rely on such practices to improve their organizations’ effectiveness [. . .] students of management learn about these techniques in business schools, corporate universities, training programs, industry associations, and the management press’ (2020: 17). Some management ideas have even become generally accepted ways of thinking and talking about management and organisation in general (Clark and Salaman, 1998). For example, Sturdy and Gabriel noted that: ‘reading Michael Porter or Tom Peters or at least “knowing” their ideas is considered a *sine qua non* for today’s practicing manager or business-person’ (2000: 983). This has fed the general assumption of knowledge entrepreneurs’ success in gaining widespread attention for their ideas, but has also given rise to long-standing debates concerning their influence on the nature of managerial work and organisational life (Sturdy, 2011). For instance, Clark emphasised that these knowledge entrepreneurs can be assumed to have a major impact on the conceptualisation and practice of strategy, yet also recognised that ‘how they impact on and influence strategy is presently little understood’ (2004b: 105).

Although the literature on management ideas has expanded substantially over the last few decades, and has significantly advanced both empirically and theoretically (Sturdy et al., 2019), *a primary focus on the potential impact of these ideas on management and organisational practice remains*. As Clark explained in his review, the increased research interest in popular management ideas: ‘may be partly motivated by a desire to understand the factors which account for the success and impact of a number of leading fashion setters’ (2004a: 298), yet offering limited detail on ‘the way in which different domains select and then process management ideas and how these then impact on managers’ (2004a: 304). In a similar vein some years later, Sturdy and colleagues considered the possible impact as ‘a persistent theme in the study of management ideas’ (2019: 510), and relate this to the general preoccupation with outcomes and effects in the field of management, and to widely shared concerns about difficulties in realising the potential effects as well as the nature of potential (unintended) effects. Recently, Piazza and Abrahamson emphasised the need to see questions related to the diffusion and use of management ideas as non-trivial particularly ‘given the role that management practices play in the management of organizations nationally and globally’ (2020: 18).

In addressing concerns about impact, this now large and established literature has developed in different productive directions, focusing primarily on the (macro-level) diffusion of these ideas and on their (micro-level) organisational implementation (e.g. Ansari et al., 2010; Huising,

2016; Reay et al., 2013). Yet, although these individually long-standing, broad and varied approaches have established strong theoretical and empirical bases, they consider only parts of the broader flow of management ideas as they move between different contexts (Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall, 2002), thereby allowing a largely fragmented and incomplete view of their possible impact. As Huising (2016) has succinctly put it: ‘Between macro patterns of diffusion and micro processes of organizational change *lies a no-mans land*’ (p. 384, emphasis added). In other words, studies on *management idea diffusion* generally do not consider where these ideas go, beyond the broad assumption that some of them receive widespread attention amongst management practitioners and organisations. Adoption here is generally considered a proxy for impact given that ‘full use’ is typically assumed (cf. Rogers, 1995). At the same time, studies on *management idea implementation* lack a systematic understanding of where these ideas come from beyond the assumption that various pressures may enhance formal adoption. Here, adoption is merely considered a necessary but not sufficient condition for – mainly organisational – impact as it is seen as largely ‘unrealised’ or undefined. These issues in understanding the impact of management ideas may not only stem from different scholarly traditions (Gray et al., 2015; Sturdy et al., 2019), but may also be an artefact of the increased academic emphasis on research papers or ‘experimental reports’ (Strang and Siler, 2017: 533) as a dominant genre which may encourage limited foci compared to other genres such as essays and books (Gabriel, 2016; Suddaby, 2019), and may constrain possibilities of addressing the conceptual complexities inherent to studying flow.

In this book we seek to address this lacuna in researching the impact of ideas by considering how *management ideas flow between relevant contexts* (cf. Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall, 2002). A focus on flow contributes to further bridging and extending the broad but largely disconnected literatures of *diffusion and implementation* as it allows us to reveal some of the complexities critical to understanding the impact of management ideas that are currently obscured from view (cf. Sturdy, 2011). For this purpose, our research focuses on management practitioners as audience members that various management knowledge entrepreneurs aim to reach through different media channels such as their books, columns, radio and television appearances, live lectures or via social media and the Internet (Barros and Ruling, 2019). Given the apparent popularity of these traditional and new business media, as well as management education such as MBA programmes, being an audience member can be seen as particularly significant to contemporary management practitioners. After all, managerial audiences are likely to play a critical role in how ideas flow

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between different contexts. Indeed, in their role as audience members, management practitioners are not only involved in contexts typically related to management idea diffusion, but also in the implementation of these ideas within and beyond their organisational contexts (Hancock and Tyler, 2019). Theoretically, an audience perspective offers vital possibilities to develop a more comprehensive view on mass communication processes: ‘from the structure of the production of the message at one end to audience perceptions and use at the other’ (Hall, 1980: 1; see also McQuail, 2010). This is in line with Strang (2010) who emphasises the need for combining a ‘greater diversity’ (p. 11) of research approaches to studying the impact of ideas.

In sum, rather than understanding the potential impact of a single management idea in terms of its possible widespread diffusion *or* organisational implementation, we seek to explore how these foci can be bridged and extended via studying management practitioners who, as audience members, are considered central actors in the broader flow of ideas between these and other relevant contexts. Therefore, we propose that central to studying the impact of management ideas is the question: *How do management practitioners come to use management ideas in contexts of their working lives?*

Our empirical interest then is in examining how practitioners come to use these ideas in relation to the context of management guru lectures, management and organisational practice, and beyond by analysing managerial audience members’ activities and related meaning making prior to, during and after a lecture. We focus on management gurus because they are widely considered as the most high-profile communicators of management ideas (Greatbatch and Clark, 2005). Within the group of knowledge entrepreneurs, management gurus are viewed as having a particularly critical role in the development and communication of these ideas. As Suddaby and Greenwood emphasise, the creation and communication of new ideas by management gurus is a ‘starting point for the cycle of knowledge production and consumption’ (2001: 249). Management gurus are therefore often viewed as figureheads and leaders of a particular idea movement that in turn influences the activities of the other knowledge entrepreneurs (Bodrozic and Adler, 2018; Huczynski, 1993; Kieser, 1997; Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall, 2002). In addition, their live lectures constitute an important moment of relatively unmediated and bounded consumption that may occur prior to organisational implementation (Carlone, 2006; Clark and Salaman, 1998; Collins, 2012; Grint and Case, 1998; Micklethwait and Wooldridge, 1996). As Greatbatch and Clark (2003) note, these are critical events that ‘create the conditions necessary to win and retain converts’ (p. 1539) and thus

build the momentum necessary for an idea to become popular and be used in management and organisational practice (see Suddaby and Greenwood, 2001; McCabe, 2011).

A primary focus on managerial audiences is important because it offers vital insights into the complexities concerning how the impact of management ideas becomes apparent and is mediated throughout different relevant contexts (cf. Sturdy, 2011). Shedding more light on managerial audiences both within and beyond mass communication settings may thus permit a better approach to bridging and extending the currently disconnected approaches to researching the impact of ideas. Developing a critical understanding of what it means to be an audience member in the context of management not only constitutes an important basis to further develop our understanding of the broader impact of different management knowledge entrepreneurs and their ideas in different contexts, but also helps expand our view of management occupations and the nature of contemporary managerial work (e.g. Clark and Salaman, 1998; du Gay, 1996; Grey, 1999; Sturdy et al., 2006).

Based on the data, approaches and findings of research on speaker-audience interaction in guru lectures (Greatbatch and Clark, 2003, 2005, 2010, 2017), and audience members' experiences of guru events (Groß et al., 2015) involving a range of leading management thinkers from the USA and Europe (see Chapters 3 and 5, and Appendices 1 and 2 for further details), this book argues that a broader, more differentiated and more dynamic view of managerial audiences is essential to shed more light on important complexities in understanding the broader impact of management ideas as well as on the nature of contemporary managerial work. In this way the book provides an account that foregrounds management practitioners' activities and related meaning making in their role as audience members with regard to contemporary management media which, given the omnipresence of these media, can be assumed as essential in management practitioners' present-day working lives (cf. Barros and Ruling, 2019; Piazza and Abrahamson, 2020). By revealing how individual audience members resolve tensions and ambiguities prior to, during and after a guru lecture which may or may not ultimately result in the organisational adoption of an idea and beyond, the book not only contributes to developing a fertile ground for advancing the flow of management ideas as a critical perspective in researching their broader impact, but also develops a better understanding of management practitioners in their role as audience member. In the following sections we discuss the key streams in the study of the impact of ideas, prior to outlining our audience perspective and providing a general overview of the structure of the book.

Researching the Impact of Management Ideas

During the last few decades, there has been a growing research interest in the potential impact of management ideas (Abrahamson, 1996; Huczynski, 1993; Piazza and Abrahamson, 2020; Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall, 2002; Strang, 2010; Sturdy, 2004). This now large and established field of research (Sturdy et al., 2019) has taken two broad, but largely dispersed directions – one focusing mainly on diffusion and another on implementation. These comprise diverging conceptualisations of adoption and impact that are rooted in their specific application of what they see as relevant *scope* and related attention to *agentic meaning making* (see Table 1.1 for an overview). Again, whilst both research approaches have essential merits individually, they have focused on specific parts of the broader flow of management ideas, thereby allowing

Table 1.1 *Main approaches to researching the impact of management ideas (MIs)*

Key dimensions	Diffusion of MIs	Implementation of MIs
Key research question	How do MIs obtain widespread attention?	How do MIs translate into practice?
Adoption decision	End point	Starting point
Impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Full use assumed • Derived from adoption – ‘proxy’ for impact 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Largely unrealised and undefined • Preceded by adoption – necessary, but not sufficient condition for impact
Scope and agency		
• Level of analysis	Mainly macro: potential adopters in relation to various settings within the context of a broad management-knowledge market, some micro analyses	Mainly micro: adopters in relation to different settings in an (intra-) organisational context, some macro analyses
• Nature of agency	Concerted efforts aimed at obtaining widespread attention amongst management practitioners	Concerted efforts aimed at translating (abstract) ideas into management and organisational practice
• Focal agents	Knowledge entrepreneurs as key <i>initiators</i> , organisations and management practitioners in <i>recipients’</i> positions, mainly driven by socio-psychological and legitimacy motives	Higher-level managers as key <i>initiators</i> , organisational members in <i>recipients</i> positions mainly driven by own specific interests

a largely fragmented and incomplete view of their possible impact (cf. Huising, 2016).

Diffusion Approaches

Studies of management idea diffusion focus typically on explaining how ideas are able to obtain widespread attention in the context of a broad management knowledge market (cf. Piazza and Abrahamson, 2020). Here, particular research attention has been given to the processes and conditions that enhance the likelihood of widespread (formal) adoption of these ideas by managers and organisations (e.g. Sturdy, 2004). In line with Strang (2010), the formal adoption of management ideas is widely considered as: ‘the end point of most diffusion studies’ (p. 10), thereby assuming ‘a decision to make full use of an innovation’ (Rogers, 1995: 21). In this approach, the impact of management ideas is generally considered as directly derived from adoption. In this way adoption is, arguably, more or less explicitly regarded as a proxy for impact, particularly given that ‘full use’ tends to be assumed. This influential approach to researching management ideas can be seen as rooted in a specific view on scope and agency.

First, in terms of *level of analysis*, the extant diffusion literature provides a number of mainly macro-level explanations that account for the adoption of management ideas amongst a large population of managers and organisations. The general focus is on a wide variety of different settings in the general context of a broad management knowledge market which may signal acts of ‘adoption’ of these ideas, such as book sales, business media attention, guru lecture attendances, formal consulting service offerings, formal accreditations and use of change programme labels (Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999; David and Strang, 2006; Furusten, 1999; Westphal et al., 1997; Kieser, 1997; Mazza and Alvarez, 2000; Zeitz et al., 1999). In addition to these macro-level analyses of diffusion, a number of studies have provided detailed analyses of the managerial responses to particular ideas in the micro-level interactions between gurus and their audiences (e.g. Greatbatch and Clark, 2003) and between consultants and their clients (e.g. Sturdy et al., 2009). Overall, this substantial and evolving body of work has explanatory value with regard to understanding the widespread attention to particular ideas amongst an audience of mainly managers and organisations. It provides important evidence that the potential influence of these ideas is driven by multiple forces and signals that, at least for some ideas, the population-level impact can be substantial. Studies of management idea diffusion have particularly contributed to our insight into mainly macro-level processes of ‘adoption’ in the context of knowledge market exchange.

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Second, a substantial number of studies in this influential stream of research have furthered our conceptualisation of the *nature and direction of agency* in relation to processes of diffusion. In particular, a set of mainly macro-level explanations have focused on the way in which management ideas are actively shaped as part of various knowledge products and services so that they are intrinsically attractive to a large group of managers (Clark and Salaman, 1998; Sturdy, 2004; ten Bos and Heusinkveld, 2007). For instance, one group of studies has focused on best-selling management books and highlighted the importance of a focus on a single concept, pithy sentences, promises of significant performance improvement, references to well-known and highly reputable organisations, examples of concrete and successful implementation, interpretive space and a set of shared editorial practices (Furusten, 1999; Giroux, 2006; Grint, 1994; Kieser, 1997; Lischinsky, 2008; Røvik, 2002). Related studies have examined the importance of rhetorical practices and persuasive strategies deployed by different management knowledge entrepreneurs. When deployed effectively, these practices and strategies have been shown to enhance the prominence of their messages and increase audience attentiveness, thus creating the conditions necessary for a managerial audience to empathise with those communicating the ideas (Cullen, 2009; Greatbatch and Clark, 2003, 2005; Jackson, 1996, 2001; Sims, Huxham and Beech, 2009).

Other explanations of management idea diffusion also relate the attractiveness of certain management ideas to the extent in which these have framed their analyses of contemporary management problems and solutions so that they resonate, and are in harmony, with the expectations of their target mass audience, but have downplayed the role of agency (e.g. Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999; Abrahamson and Eisenman, 2008; Barley and Kunda, 1992). Management ideas are unlikely to gain traction with target audiences if they fail to convince them of their plausibility by apprehending the *zeitgeist* or ‘spirit of the times’ (Grint, 1994: 193; see also Abrahamson, 1996; Kieser, 1997). The point here is that popular management ideas are assumed to have articulated persuasively both how they address key managerial problems and priorities (e.g. efficiency, performance enhancements, creating effective change), and why they offer the best means to do so at a certain point in time. However, although this particular notion draws on economic approaches to explaining why management ideas may generate a mass appeal (Bikchandani, Hirshleifer and Welch, 1998; Bloom and van Reenen, 2007; Bodrozcic and Adler, 2018), in line with Grint (1994) the benefits of particular ideas in terms of means-ends relationships are likely discursively constructed via the *zeitgeist* – thereby suggesting the role and significance of agency.

Third, concerning the *position and positioning of the key agents*, diffusion studies tend to take different knowledge entrepreneurs as the main focal point and primary setting to understand the impact of management ideas (Abrahamson, 1996; Clark, 2004a; Kieser, 1997; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2001). Sturdy and colleagues observed that within the field, ‘most studies focus primarily on one key actor such as management gurus, management consultants, business schools, multinationals, and the business and social media’ (2019: 10). Whilst all these actors are considered relevant in understanding the adoption of ideas amongst managers and organisations, they are expected to perform different interdependent roles in the context of a broader management knowledge market or system of management ideas (Mol et al., 2019; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2001). Indeed, in this context, business schools are generally considered to educate the potential consumers of ideas, consultants are associated with processes of knowledge commodification and management gurus are seen as essential in legitimating management knowledge in a particular field (Suddaby and Greenwood, 2001). For instance, drawing primarily on analyses of these books and lectures, a significant body of prior work has helped us understand complex issues concerning the way management gurus, as an important group of knowledge entrepreneurs, use media to build their personal reputations with managerial audiences, and promote their ideas. In particular, this stream of research has significantly advanced our knowledge about gurus’ ability to shape their ideas in ways that widely appeal to a mass audience (Clark and Salaman, 1996, 1998; Furusten, 1999; Huczynski, 1993; Jackson, 2001).

In research on diffusion, actors in ‘adopter’ positions generally receive a ‘subordinate and predetermined or highly structured status’ (Heusinkveld et al., 2011: 142). On the basis of acts of adoption in these settings – signalling attention to management ideas – theorists have also developed assumptions about the nature and main drivers of actors in these roles (Bort and Kieser, 2019; Wilhelm and Bort, 2013). An important stream of literature suggests that managers and organisations use these ideas primarily in response to legitimacy pressures. In this way organisations seek to *externally* display their conformity to generally accepted norms of how organisations should be governed (e.g. Abrahamson, 1996; Fiss and Zajac, 2006; Peters and Heusinkveld, 2010; Wilhelm and Bort, 2013). In line with this assumption, various diffusion studies have shown that managers’ signalling of having adopted a relatively ‘new’ idea relates to how firms are valued within a society in general and by experts such as stock market analysts in particular (Nicolai et al., 2010; Nijholt et al., 2016; Staw and Epstein, 2000). Such a favourable reputation can have significant consequences for the viability

of an organisation (Benders, 1999). Another explanation for the desirability of popular management ideas amongst those in ‘adopter’ positions relates to the ‘intra-psychic’ tensions and search for control and certainty that are generally associated with enacting the managerial task in a world that appears messy, capricious and unstable (Abrahamson, 1996; Gill and Whittle, 1993; Huczynski, 1993; Jackson, 1996; Sturdy, 2004; Wilhelm and Bort, 2013). Thus, these ideas are viewed as attractive to and build dependence from management practitioners, because they help ‘satisfy individuals’ [managers] *psychological needs*’ (Abrahamson, 1996: 271; see also Ernst and Kieser, 2002; Jackall, 1988; Piazza and Abrahamson, 2020). Exemplifying this approach, Watson writes, these ideas are attractive because they help managers to ‘create a sense of order in the face of the potential chaos of human existence’ (1994: 904).

Implementation Approaches

In relative parallel to this body of work on macro-level diffusion, there is a growing research interest in the mostly micro-level implementation of management ideas (e.g. Benders, 1999; Benders and Verlaar, 2003; Huisig, 2016; Kelemen, 2000; Knights and McCabe, 1998; McCabe and Russell, 2017; McCann et al., 2015; Mueller and Carter, 2005; Strang, 2010; van Grinsven et al., 2020). Here studies focus primarily on explaining how these ideas, once formally adopted within organisational contexts, are subsequently transformed or ‘translated’ into management and organisational practice (e.g. Ansari et al., 2014; Reay et al., 2013; van Grinsven et al., 2016). Thus, adoption is not seen as an end point but as an essential point of departure for a series of concerted efforts within specific, organisational contexts. Viewed in this way, adoption is a necessary condition but no guarantee for impact. Rather studies of implementation typically consider the impact of management ideas – habitually within organisations – as largely unrealised and undefined. This growing stream of research can also be related to a specific view on scope and agency.

First, in terms of *level of analysis*, whilst some analyses have connected to macro-level explanations by showing how organisational experiences may shape the wider evolving reputation of a specific management idea (e.g. Benders et al., 2019; Scarbrough et al., 2015; Zbaracki, 1998), implementation studies typically focus on explaining how abstract ideas, formally adopted at the organisational level, are translated and institutionalised into management and organisational practice (e.g. Ansari et al., 2014; Mueller and Whittle, 2011; Nicolai and Dautwiz, 2010; Reay et al., 2013). The primary focus of most studies is on the efforts of a selected