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Citation

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the reasons for the apparently powerful impact of management gurus' ideas (i.e. guru theory) on senior managers. An examination of the limited literature on management gurus and other related literatures suggests three explanations for the appeal of guru theory for senior managers. The first set of explanations relates to various features of management work which may heighten managers' receptivity to guru ideas. The second set focuses on the gurus themselves and emphasizes the form in which they are presented (i.e. public performances). The final set of explanations highlights the importance of the socio-economic and cultural context within which guru theories emerge and become widely adopted. A number of criticisms of these explanations are offered: that they define the manager as passive, that the flow of ideas is one way (guru to manager), that they rely on an academic conception of knowledge. An alternative explanation of their success is outlined which suggests that their work - their analyses, presentations and theories - offer attractive conceptions of the role of managers which constitute the identity of the modern senior manager as an heroic, transformative leader. Gurus therefore not only constitute the organizational realities but also managers themselves.

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1980s management guru writing - guru 'theory' - has become a dominant paradigm within management thought. A number of commentators have attested to the increasing popularity and significance of guru theory. Huczynski (1993a, pp. 35-58) maintains that guru theory is one of six leading families of management ideas in the twentieth century. Oliver (1990) and Wood (1989) note its ascendancy and distinctiveness as a new management paradigm which ensures a more than passing influence on management theory and practice. Willmott (1993, p. 516) notes that it is having 'a material effect on the politics of work' and has become a force that has moral as well as managerial significance. Jeffcutt (1994) terms this area of organizational understanding 'organizational interpretation', and writes: 'Like the ''philosopher's stone'' of medieval alchemy, the genre of organizational interpretation has appeared to provide a medium through which the theoretical and empirical ''base metal'' of organization could become transformed into the ''golden glow'' of ordered success' (p. 234).

Guru theory - discussed in more detail below - involves the presentation of ambitious claims to transform managerial practice, organizational structures and cultures and, crucially, organizational performance, through the recommendation of a fundamental almost magical cure or transformation that rejects the past,

and reinvents the organization, its employees, their relationships, attitudes and behaviour. The current role of management gurus in the production and diffusion of accepted management wisdom about organizational environments, organizational structures and systems for high performance, the formulation and implementation of business strategy, the achievement of the learning organization, managing change etc., is fundamental. Yet it has been generally overlooked.

It has been noted that over the last 30 years senior managers have been assailed by - and curiously have been prepared to accept - a steady stream of apparently highly attractive suggestions for re-modelling their businesses; ideas which in succession have risen and fallen in popularity and use (see Abrahamson, 1996; Byrne, 1986; Eccles and Nohria, 1992, pp. 25-6; Gill and Whittle, 1993; Kilmann, 1984; Mayer, 1983). These guru-led ideas include T-groups, centralization of large corporate decision making, matrix management, portfolio management, zero-based budgeting, management by walking about, quality circles, Theory Z, delayering, TQM, corporate culture, business process re-engineering (BPR), the learning organization, and so on.

How can the impact of these various prescriptions be explained, especially since the life-cycle of these ideas takes the form of a bell-shaped curve with a striking cycle of enthusiasm and decline - the rapid waxing and waning of these ideas, with managers soon forgetting - and forgiving - their previous conversion at the hands of management gurus? How is it that managers seem to be insatiably keen on the next wave of management fashionable thinking when they have hardly got over the last? To date little attention has been paid to seeking answers to these questions. This paper seeks to rectify this situation by attempting to map and understand the reasons for the apparently powerful impact of management gurus' ideas and performances on senior managers. Gaining a better understanding of the guru phenomenon is critical for several reasons. First, few people in employment will not currently be experiencing the consequences of some guru-led or initiated programme of organizational change whether it be BPR, TQM, the learning organization, etc. Second, the appeal of gurus is curious since: (1) there are major doubts about the efficacy of the core ideas (Carroll, 1983; Clark and Salaman, 1996a; Guest, 1992); (2) many critics have noted that guru theory either invents management techniques that only appear to be novel or rediscovers/reinvents old management techniques that were invented previously or forgotten (Kimberly, 1981); (3) guru-led programmes are characterized by high rates of failure (The Economist 1994a; Grint, 1994); and, (4) the ideas gurus develop and disseminate may do more harm to organizations than good (Abrahamson, 1991; Eccles and Nohria, 1992). Third, management gurus are fashion setters and the swings in fashion they inspire are an extremely serious matter for management scholars. In part this is because as the ideas they develop and disseminate permeate throughout the management community they become the issues that management scholars investigate. So, to some extent management gurus set the management research agenda. But also management gurus and business schools are both competing to convince the management audience that they are at the forefront of management innovation. If the ideas developed and disseminated by business schools are perceived to be less valid than those of management gurus then they will increasingly become seen as peripheral institutions. Indeed, Gerlach (1996) argues that guru texts have already become the dominant social discourse within organizational studies. He argues that it is gurus rather than academics who have defined the 'new' ideal-form of organization and consequently set the problems to be solved and in the process established themselves as the main problem solvers. Thus understanding the factors which account for guru success and impact may assist scholars in business schools to effectively intervene in the management-fashion-setting process by creating powerful alternative discourses which ensure the long-term viability of many business schools.

The paper is structured as follows. In the first part we examine the nature of management gurus and guru theory. In the second part we explore conventionally available explanations for the impact and value of guru ideas. It is suggested that these explanations are based on a view of guru ideas as being attractive to managers because of managers' insecurity, perceived incapacity, or inherently limited ways of thinking, plus their inherent susceptibility to glib, familiar ideas or to the appealing performance of guru presentations. In the final section we move to a more interactive notion of gurus and their clients where

managers are not dopes and dupes, where managers are not bedazzled by gurus' ideas and recommendations, but where both parties work collaboratively to develop a body of knowledge - a series of narratives - which are beneficial to both.

MANAGEMENT GURUS AND GURU THEORY

Huczynski (1993a) identifies three types of management gurus: (1) 'academic gurus' (e.g. Kenneth Blanchard, Rosabeth Moss Kanter, Michael Porter); (2) 'consultant gurus' (e.g. Peter Drucker, Tom Peters, Robert Waterman); and, (3) 'hero managers' (e.g. John Harvey-Jones, the ex-Chairman of ICI).[1] First, they are essentially purveyors of management fashion. Their ideas are invariably characterized by rapid, bell-shaped swings in popularity. According to Abrahamson (1996, p. 256), 'we should label swings "management fashions" only when they are the product of a management-fashion-setting process involving particular management fashion setters - organizations and individuals who dedicate themselves to producing and disseminating management knowledge'. Management gurus are therefore part of a management-fashion-setting community, the other members of which include management consultancies, business schools and business-press organizations, which, in line with Hirsch's (1972) model of cultural production, is concerned with creating, selecting, processing and disseminating management ideas to users (i.e. managers). However, not all ideas become mass management fashions, or fads of the moment. Gurus therefore either thrive or falter depending on their ability to produce ideas that have mass appeal to their management audience.

A second attribute of management gurus is the way in which they disseminate their ideas to management users. The traditional way in which gurus and would-be gurus launch themselves and their ideas is by writing a seminal management text (see Fincham, 1995).[2] Management gurus therefore use the book-publishing industry to disseminate their ideas. According to Wood (1989, p. 380), this material consists of three types of books: (1) books which offer analysis (with prescriptions) of a broad theme (e.g. the Japanese Management Model); (2) books which focus on methods for improving the handling of a specific topic (e.g. motivation); and, (3) reports of success stories which include studies of firms and individuals' accounts of their personal achievements.

These books have perhaps been the publishing phenomenon of the 1980s. As a consequence, guru ideas have had enormous impact - and have brought rich rewards to their originators (if not to those who receive them). For example In Search of Excellence (Peters and Waterman, 1982) sold 122,000 copies in the first two months of publication. Within one year it had sold more copies than any other book except the Living Bible in 1972 and 1973. The book has sold more than 5 million copies world-wide. Stephen Covey's book Seven Habits spent four years on the New York Times best seller list and has sold more than 6 million copies world-wide. Hammer and Champy's (1993) book Re-engineering the Corporation has sold over 2 million copies to date and is currently the 'management world's most fashionable fad' (Lorenz, 1993).

However, management gurus are more than successful authors - they are also successful orators, indeed experts in persuasive performances. Like a theatrical script, management guru books are the basis for action, but gurus must have a means of realizing their potential. Mangham (1990) writes of theatrical scripts that they are 'an abbreviated and necessarily incomplete version of a possible work of art' (p. 107). The task of the performer, in this case a management guru, is to bring the text to full realization by transforming the unfamiliar into the familiar so that the text has meaning for the audience to which their actions are addressed. The book or text is a distant inaccessible world which can only be made dazzlingly present and real and intelligible by the actions of the performer/management guru. The guru 'knows the road to the centre of the world: the hole in the sky through which he can ¯y up to the highest heaven or the aperture through which he can descend to the underworld' (Eliade, 1987, p. 205). Guru performances are therefore much more than mere dry exposition; they involve highly theatrical behaviour, anecdotes,

exhortation, challenge, threat, confrontation and humour. Odd things happen. They are a place where imaginative truth is experienced as present truth.

Given the importance of these events to the nature of guru activity it is hardly surprising to discover that in the 1980s one of the most influential gurus, Tom Peters, was taking up to 150 seminars a year and charging around $60,000 per appearance. He now limits his public performances to between 50 and 60 seminars a year and is estimated to earn between $70,000 and $90,000 for a day-long seminar (The Economist, 1994b, p. 90). Other management gurus, such as Stephen Covey, Kinichi Ohmae, Richard Pascale, Peter Senge, etc., also conduct management seminars and charge similar appearance fees. Jackson (1996a) reports that Michael Hammer, currently perhaps the most influential management guru (see Thackray, 1993), delivers seminars to over 5,000 senior managers annually and receives a fee of up to $50,000 for each event.

Finally, a critical and distinctive feature of gurus' ideas and performances is a forceful denunciation of previous principles of organization, management and structure. They are not offering a mere shift in direction. Rather they are going the whole way. Typically a guru rejects current ways of thinking about, and implementing, the design of work. The rejection of traditional forms makes the identification and development of the new all the more pressing and important. Gurus supply the directions and encouragement for this reconstruction. In guru narratives the organization must recognize sinful ways thoroughly in order to overcome and vanquish them; they must reject the past, embrace the path of virtue, and be reborn. Kanter (1990, p. 356), for example, insists that organizations must 'either move away from bureaucratic guarantees to post-entrepreneurial flexibility or they stagnate'. Critical to much guru theory is the argument, represented for example by Peters, that traditional forms of organization and management have reached their limits and are inappropriate for new current conditions. Organizational control through increasingly complicated structures, rules and regulation has reached its limit. This argument asserts that 'modern' organizational forms stressed the importance of control over variability, of regularity and predictability over spontaneity. Like all gurus, Peters et al. are essentially arguing for the limits of modernity - of current forms and principles of organization. Specifically, Peters et al. argue that under structural forms of control workers were stripped of their humanness, they became mere objects, instruments, 'so that their subjectivity, the primeval "givenness" of their existence could be denied and they themselves could be made hospitable for instrumental meanings' (Bauman, 1992, p. xi). However, while gurus are focused on work they locate the source of work and organizational difficulties in the larger society and ethos. They argue that employees' disenchantment, like that of the world as a whole, stemmed from the encounter between the designing posture and the strategy of instrumental rationality. The achievement of that encounter was the world split between wilful subject and will-less object; 'between the privileged actor whose will counted, and the rest of the world whose will did not count' (Bauman, 1992, p. xi). Gurus claim to be able to resolve this hiatus.

Having identified the main features of management gurus and guru theory, in the next section we examine a range of explanations which have been offered to explain their impact.

REASONS FOR THE IMPACT OF GURUS' IDEAS: CONVENTIONAL EXPLANATIONS

In this section we collect together a number of available explanations for the success of guru ideas. To achieve this we have had to overcome the fact that the literature on this subject while growing is nevertheless extremely limited. In the discussion below we have taken a broad approach and included literature that was not necessarily originally produced in response to the problematic addressed here. We therefore draw on a number of literatures that have previously tended to be viewed as external to an analysis of the guru phenomenon but nevertheless have - or could be seen to have - explanatory purchase for the issue addressed in this paper. In the subsequent discussion these various explanations are

organized into three sections. We examine, in turn, explanations which apply to (1) management users, (2) the management gurus themselves and (3) the socioeconomic and cultural context within which they develop and disseminate their ideas.

Management Users

Since guru work is addressed to management users rather than organizational systems, the first set of explanations for gurus' impact relate to those features of management work which may heighten managers' receptivity to guru ideas.

Psychological explanations. The majority of literature examining the management guru phenomenon to date has sought to explain their impact on managers in terms of their ability to 'satiate individuals' [managers'] psychological needs' (Abrahamson, 1996, p. 271). This explanation focuses on the way in which the ideas that gurus develop and then promulgate through books and presentations assist managers to control a world that is unordered and unstable. In a world that is perceived as fickle and unpredictable, guru theory, it is claimed, helps managers 'create a sense of order in the face of the potential chaos of human existence' (Watson, 1994a, p. 904). It is their search for control and predictability which renders managers vulnerable to the quasi-magical solutions management gurus offer as relief to their sources of frustration. Versions of this argument can be found in the work of Byrne (1986, 1992), Huczynski (1993a, b), Watson (1994a) and Jackson (1996a).

The nature of the managerial task. A second class of explanation draws on that literature which has sought to examine the nature of managerial work. It may be that gurus' ideas appeal because they are formulated in ways that are inherently attractive to and easily accessible by managers in terms of their work-developed preferences for the nature and format of information. A number of studies that have sought to identify the key features of management work over the last 40 years suggest that it is characterized by brevity, spontaneity, fragmentation and discontinuity, adaption to circumstances, superficiality, unreflectivity, and a focus on doing, on tangible, concrete activities, and on the immediate (see Carlson, 1951; Hales, 1986; Martinko and Gardiner, 1990; Mintzberg, 1980, 1990; Stewart, 1967, 1983). These characteristic features of managers' work may cause managers to be responsive to ideas that are presented in particular ways. Indeed, analysis of a number of guru texts conducted by Conrad (1985), Freeman (1985) and Zibergeld (1984) indicate that they are immediate, practical, concrete, superficial and easily read and assimilated.

Management learning. Others have focused on the nature of management learning in attempts to understand their receptivity to some sorts of ideas, or the form in which ideas are presented. Kolb et al. (1984), for example, have argued that because of the nature of managers' work demands, managers may learn in distinctive ways - i.e. might have action-focused learning styles (Honey and Mumford, 1986). And Rogers (1986) has suggested that managers as adults would prefer learning episodes that are usually episodic in character, occurring in short bursts of intense activity; goal and task-centred; use demonstration; and avoid general principles. If true, this could have obvious and important implications for the qualities of guru ideas and presentations that appeal to managers.

The social aspects of management work. Some researchers have noted the social aspect of management work - which could also be key to senior managers' admiration for and attraction to gurus' ideas and performances. Mangham (1990) has argued that managing is a 'performing art', thus drawing attention to the fact that managing 'involves the reading and interpretation of events and circumstances and the expression and embodiment of that reading in action on the part of the managers. Action is eloquence' (p. 110). Managers could thus be attracted to gurus' performances because in impressing managers within a social setting (the guru performance) gurus demonstrate these very qualities of performance, interpersonal charisma and 'eloquence' that managers admire and wish to master. Managers may admire - and listen to - gurus because gurus display high levels of public mastery of the social qualities and attributes which managers themselves admire.

Guru Performances

Another type of explanation has concentrated on the gurus themselves and suggests that their success and impact on managers is related to their public performance - not simply to gurus' ideas and their claims but the form in which they are presented. The impact of guru ideas may in part therefore derive from the power of their public performances (Clark, 1995; Clark and Salaman, 1996a, b; Huczynski, 1993a). Clark and Salaman (1996a) argue that the guru performance has major elements of display and conversion with a focus on the irrational, emotional and symbolic aspects of organizations. They argue that a key feature of

> successful performances given by management gurus is the successful management of risk, promise and opportunity within a particularly highly demanding type of public performance, that carries a risk of total and public failure and acclaim . . . the successful ones use their ability to manage this performance risk to build their personal 'characters' or reputations with clients. (Clark and Salaman, 1996a, p. 12)

Similarly, Huczynski (1993a) argues that the public performances of management gurus are exercises in persuasive communication. Essentially gurus are seeking to achieve transformations of consciousness in the audience of managers. Huczynski (1993a, pp. 251-67) adopts Lewin's (1951) change model to argue that alterations in audience beliefs are the outcome of three phases of a presentation: creating

disequilibrium by challenging audience members' normative world-views (unfreezing); inducing guilt through the threat of damnation and the promise of salvation (changing); and enabling the audience to see familiar ideas and concepts in new ways (refreezing).

In order to facilitate conversion or identification with a new idea a powerful range of communication techniques are used by gurus. Huczynski (1993a) draws on Atkinson's (1984) work to reveal the importance of rhetorical styles and claptraps combined with a number of de-stabilizing techniques which generate anxiety in the audience (see Oliver, 1990; Sargant, 1976). This is heightened since the essence of the performance confirms the nature of the threat to an organization, offers protection from that threat, substitutes 'unreal' for 'real' achievement, transports the audience to a symbolic realm, addresses symptoms and not causes, and places an unrealistic emphasis on optimistic models (Clark and Salaman, 1996a).

Socioeconomic and Cultural Explanations

A number of commentators have highlighted the importance of the socioeconomic and cultural context within which management theories emerge and become widely adopted (e.g. Alvesson, 1990; Whitley, 1984; Willmott, 1993). Otherwise, it might seem that the guru ideas themselves 'produce the practices they describe, rather than appreciating how their prescriptions selectively (re)construct and rationalize particular kinds of management practice' (Willmott, 1993, p. 518). In this sense the popularity and impact of particular guru ideas is related to their ability to (re)frame their analyses of contemporary management problems and solutions in such a way that they resonate with and are in harmony with the expectations and understandings of their target audience. If they fail to convince their target audience of the plausibility and appropriateness of their ideas then their prescriptive advice will probably not be heeded. According to Grint (1994, p. 193) 'for the "plausibility" to occur the ideas most likely to prevail are those that are apprehended as capturing the zeitgeist or "spirit of the times"'. Indeed, The Economist (1994a, p. 80) suggests that any successful management guru must possess a 'nose for the zeitgeist'.

Given the above, it may be that macroeconomic fluctuations could affect demand for guru theory. Barley and Kunda (1992) suggest that long-term, 50-year Kondratieff waves of economic expansion and contraction may parallel broad changes in managers' preferences for different type of management ideas. They argue that because in expansionary periods profits are dependent on capital investment and

automation there should be a demand for management techniques which stress the efficient use of structures and technologies as a means of increasing labour productivity and profitability (rational rhetorics). In contrast, during periods of contraction the supply of capital investment outstrips demand, managers become interested in labour as a factor of production with the consequence that there is demand for management techniques which stress employee relations as a means of increasing labour productivity and profitability (normative rhetorics). Applying this argument to the realm of management gurus suggests that their success may in part be due to their ability to reformulate their ideas so that they are in harmony with the dominant management rhetorics which are related to macroeconomic fluctuations. Thus during an economic upswing they will tend to develop rational rhetorics and during a downswing they will tend to develop normative rhetorics.

The way in which guru theory resonates with wider political programmes may have an effect on its demand. For example, a number of different commentators note the affinity between guru theory and the values of the politico-ethical project of developing an enterprise culture fostered by the Reagan and Thatcher administrations (du Guy, 1990; Miller and Rose, 1990; Rose, 1990; Silver, 1987). Du Gay (1994) and du Gay and Salaman (1992), for example, have argued that guru type ideas work together to constitute a specific discursive formation in which the old (bureaucratic) forms of organization are unfavourably contrasted with new, flexible forms, the latter closely related to the culture of enterprise. They argue that new, enterprising, anti-bureaucratic forms of organizational administration and structuring are closely bound up with the de-differentiation of the spheres of production and consumption, and the supremacy of the language of the market. The advocacy of enterprise within organizations - with all the numerous implications for employees' competencies, structures, cultures, etc. - is a major element of gurus' ideas, recommendations and presentations. Since the language of enterprise demonstrates an affinity with extra-organizational values and debates it may have extra appeal for managers.

Other writers have noted the correspondence between guru packages and core national values. Guest (1990), for example, argues that the success of guru ideas, particularly those which originate in the USA, is due to their close links with core values in American society: optimism, simplicity, the focus on a dream, an idealized sense of possibility, the focus on individualism and enterprise, and the view of the leader. He argues that the appeal of these ideas is not simply that they offer attractive solutions to current problems, but that these solutions are modern-day manifestations of key elements of the American Dream. They therefore embody and promote key traditional American values.

In a similar vein, Grint (1994) argues that much guru theory claims to revive or rediscover forgotten (or abandoned) national (American) values in the face of threats from the apparently superior values of foreign (Japanese) cultures. He suggests that guru theory seeks to defend and emphasize fundamental American values in the face of the threat from the 'other' (Japanese) values. Guru historical narrative he suggests asserts that America's current competitive problems are not due to fundamental weaknesses but to America's recent complacency and inertia. America has lost touch with its essence; it has forgotten what it once was. But the guru can offer salvation. The guru shows the way back to true, basic values and proper practices, enabling us to recognize how and where we have gone astray. Grint, for example, writes of a recent guru-led initiative, BPR, that it offers a solution and a way forward that is convenient and comfortable:

> The language of reengineering renders opaque developments clear, not by providing a more objective analysis of the situation and the solution but by providing a persuasive rendering of these. Moreover, part of the persuasive essence lies in the resonance that it 'reveals' between the old and the new, particularly between American past glories and future conquests . . . American industry is weak now because, rather than despite the fact that, it was so strong before; and American industry will be strong again because of, rather than despite, American culture. (Grint, 1994, p. 194)

Similarly, Keisling (1984) argues that 'In Search of Excellence' brought welcome balm for America's battered self image. There was a better, wholly indigenous solution to declining productivity and industrial decline and Peters and Waterman's argument is put in terms that most people could immediately grasp' (p. 40). Samuelson (1984) suggests that 'In Search of Excellence reassures us. It's a morality tale - Horatio Alger in a three piece suit' (p. 70).

CONSULTANTS AND CLIENTS TELLING TALES TOGETHER: THE MANAGERS AS A COLLABORATIVE CONSTRUCT

The preceding types of explanation of guru impact and appeal are open to a number of criticisms. Primarily they tend to accept unquestioningly the arguments and assumptions of guru ideas themselves (the virtues and necessity of HRS; the role of culture; the pressures for change from the environment; the death of bureaucracy, etc.). In doing so they assume a simplistic and one-way conception of the guru-client relationship. Also, with the forms of explanation considered so far, gurus are defined as the dominant, initiating partners, exploiting the naivete, vulnerability of their client managers, selling them glib promises, fads, empty slogans; confusing them through their rhetoric, dazzling them with their performances. Managers, on the other hand, are conceived largely as passive, docile consumers of gurus' ideas and recommendations, inherently vulnerable to gurus' blandishments, anxiously searching for reassurance and support, looking desperately for new ideas. Managers' needs are seen as those of 'a petulant infant, insecure, desperately seeking predictability and order, easily bored and distracted, fixated on instant gratification and filled with yearnings for dependence and authority figures' (Thomas, 1993). Finally these explanations rely implicitly on a formalistic, academic and rationalistic conception of knowledge, in relation to which guru activity is evaluated as shallow and glib.

There is something unsatisfactory about analyses which rest on such foundations, and in what follows we offer a tentative alternative approach to the explanation of guru appeal which differs with respect to each of these criticisms. This approach offers a more interactive and a more balanced conception of the guru-client relationship - one where both parties derive benefit from the exchange and where both parties influence the content and nature of the relationship; where there are no winners and losers but rather a collusion in mutual winning. In this conception both parties adjust the relationship and the ideas transmitted within the relationship to the benefit of both. The previous producer/consumer model is replaced by one where both processes occur simultaneously and where both parties produce and use the ideas in question - where they define and feed each others' needs and identities. In this approach guru theory is regarded not as a body of expert knowledge that gurus make available to their grateful clients, but as a means, as a language for representing negotiated and mutually acceptable waysof knowing, defining and talking about management, organization and managers.

Such an approach is in its infancy and requires more work and research. This paper is intended not to assert the superiority or feasibility of this position but to describe a potentially useful alternative position. This approach seeks to explain the impact and appeal of guru ideas, not through their relationship with what are regarded as fixed aspects of the manager's role (see above) but through their contribution to the management role itself. Theories of organization (guru theory) and of strategy contain common discursive elements which represent both the organization, and the manager (Rouleau and Seguin, 1995). Analysis of these discursive forms is an important step in the understanding of current developments in organization structure and functioning.

The Nature of Guru Knowledge

The first element in the new approach is a redefinition of the role of expert knowledge as the basis of guru activity. Conventionally, guru ideas, however disparaged by academic commentators, are seen to represent a body of expert knowledge and advice. One view of what gurus do and of their role, is to see

them as professionals - people with a mastery of a body of practical theory and skill. This view is one which has been asserted by some gurus themselves. However, gurus do not possess and cannot deploy a body of formal, authoritative theoretical professional knowledge to underpin their work, because there is no such knowledge. The 'knowledge' of gurus cannot be defined on a neutral, formal, theoretical basis, for not only are the results of guru knowledge and work ambiguous but also it is ambiguous what role knowledge plays at all. Organizations - or their senior managers - demanding expert assistance from gurus therefore cannot rely on accessing formal, uncontested, rational bodies of knowledge and expertise.

In these circumstances, guru theory can be seen less as a set of expert solutions, and more as a language for representing mutually acceptable ways of knowing and defining and talking about management, managers and organizations and their structures and dynamics (threats, opportunities, solutions, etc.). Gurus' authority vis-a-vis their clients - senior managers - depends on mastering the impression of possessing authoritative knowledge. The guru must seem to be authoritative, must behave confidently, must be in command. Their success with clients depends on their apparent possession of what senior managers value, on their mastering techniques which convey the impression that they possess authority and expertise in areas that clients value. Since, according to Starbuck (1992), clients tend to make their judgements about the value and quality of gurus' services on the basis of 'general symbols of expertise', their success depends on their manipulation of symbols of authority - their 'symbolic outputs'. Hence the foundations for guru success rests on their knowledge and skill at identifying and manipulating the mutually acceptable symbols of knowledge in the course of convincing performances.

Another feature of the knowledge on which gurus claim authority is that it does not pre-date the client relationship but is developed in interaction with the clients. It is therefore a social product, developed in 'consultation' with their clients. Guru 'knowledge' is produced and displayed through a process of 'translation' – an inherently interactive process.

> By translation we understand all the negotiations, intrigues, calculations, acts of persuasion and violence, thanks to which an actor or force takes, or causes to be conferred on itself, authority to speak or act on behalf of another actor or force. 'Our interests are the same', 'do what I want', 'you cannot succeed without going through me'. (Callon and Latour, 1981, p. 279)

Translation is achieved through 'problematization' (Callon, 1986) whereby actors (i.e. management gurus) convince other actors (i.e. clients) that their interests coincide – 'I want what you want' - by re-defining the 'problem' in terms of a solution owned or within the orbit of the former.

Gurus as Manipulators of Myths

A second element of the approach that we are seeking to develop suggests that gurus' impact is based on their manipulation not of expert knowledge, but of myths and symbols. Since they lack an objectivistic and functionalist knowledge base, gurus depend for their success with clients, and demonstrate their expertise, through the manipulation of myths, meanings and symbols. The insecure knowledge-base of guru activity 'means that the possibility of rationality - clarifying means-ends relationships or exercising qualified judgement – becomes reduced. Thereby, a space is created for . . . the adoption of institutionalized myths' (Alvesson, 1993, pp. 1002-3). Similarly, Willmott (1993, p. 517) supports the notion that guru theory, by constituting 'a self-disciplining form of employee subjectivity' is a strategy for managing meaning and extending management control.

Therefore, the critical feature of guru theory is its symbolic quality - it works by giving the sense of being knowledgeable. Being perceived as knowledgeable is more important than being knowledgeable: gurus must appear to make sense by reflecting back to managers what they already know, value and want. The knowledge required to achieve this is knowledge of the management of meaning, of myths and of rhetoric. If, as Jackall (1988, p. 137) suggests, gurus are 'virtuosos in symbolic management', then impression management becomes not incidental but central to guru work. Knowing how to win

management acceptance by becoming an obligatory passage point (Callon, 1986) becomes the key type of knowledge. Rhetoric is at the core of guru work. As a consequence, a distinctive feature of guru work is 'the degree of elaboration of the language code through which one describes oneself, one's organization, regulates client-orientations as well as identity' (Alvesson, 1993, p. 1007). The focus of this language is the claim to mastery of, and expertise in, valued managerial behaviours, skills and knowledge.

Gurus as Myth Makers and Storytellers

The third element of our approach emphasizes that gurus not only act as managers of meaning, but that they achieve this through their use of language, and specifically through acting as organizational myth makers or storytellers. This is their real expertise and source of their knowledge base. Gurus' myths or stories are rationality-surrogates. They compensate for the uncertainties generated by the absence (impossibility) of 'true' expert knowledge (which follows from the ambiguities involved, especially the difficulty in establishing clear means-ends linkages).

However, what are these myths about, and what purposes do they serve? Alvesson (1993) has suggested that gurus help managers convince themselves - and others - that they know what they are doing and that they have had the help of the brightest and the best. The use of gurus is a powerful and convincing symbol of an organization's status and aspirations. The analysis of the content of gurus' mythic stories has been taken a step further by both Jackall (1988) and Mangham (1990). Jackall suggests that the appeal of gurus lies in the connections between the skills managers must use, and the roles they play, and the skills of gurus: 'Managers' use of certain kinds of expertise, namely that generated by management consultants of various sorts, themselves virtuosos in symbolic manipulation, aptly illustrates their peculiar symbolic skills' (Jackall, 1988, p. 137).

Mangham has argued that the focus of this symbolic work, which gurus are employed to support, is as much about managers and their roles and identities as it is about the subject of management, organization and organizational performance: 'Managing is itself a form of performance: to manage is to engage in the art of performing . . . a process that involves the reading and interpretation of events and circumstances and the expression and embodiment of that reading in action on the part of the manager' (Mangham, 1990, pp. 106, 110). Management gurus may therefore support - and appeal to - managers not simply by displaying qualities managers themselves value and use, but by enhancing managers' confidence in performing their role as senior managers through their mythic story-telling.

Gurus' success with their clients lies in their capacity, in partnership with the client, to address and manipulate through myths and stories, symbolic issues of great pertinence and salience to senior managers: managers' own roles, skills and identities within the 'new' organization.

The Nature of Guru Storytelling

The 'dreams' and schemes of contemporary gurus' discourses about the 'new' organization play a major part in constituting the new senior manager (du Gay, 1996). Management theories - purveyed through guru writings and packages - help managers to make sense of themselves by providing them with purpose and hope, and by defining for them who they are, why they exist and why they are important (Watson, 1994a, b). It has always been so. Management writers such as Taylor, Fayol, Follett, Mayo - by articulating conceptions of the organization - also defined the character and attributes of the senior manager. Bendix (1956) in his classic study - still highly pertinent today - notes that 'all ideologies of management have in common the effort to interpret the exercise of authority in a favourable light'. And, in a prescient remark, continues: 'To do this, the exercise of authority is . . . justified with the assertion that the few possess qualities of excellence which enable them to realize the interests of many' (Bendix, 1956, p. 13). Today this is the role of guru theories. They define the managerial - or leadership - qualities

necessary for effective implementation of the senior management role. Watson (1994a) has noted this relationship between guru theory and identity. On the basis of a study of UK managers he notes that guru language and theory play a part in helping managers make sense of their lives and their role and 'their place in the scheme of things' (Watson, 1994a, p. 896).

The dispositions, actions and attributes that constitute the business leader have no natural form or basis but come into being through current discourses of organizational restructuring projects developed and purveyed by management gurus - as a series of historically specific assemblages. These contemporary guru 'theories' of organization define the nature and role of the new executive; and, we contend, in so doing generate the appeal of guru theory for gurus' clients. And in constituting the senior manager, gurus ensure their own continuing role. As Jackson has remarked, 'Management gurus are both products and producers of managers' needs to define, judge, reconcile and preserve themselves' (Jackson, 1996a, p. 586).

Management gurus convey their expertise to managers and construct the manager's role through language. In this they do what managers do: they use language to help their clients understand, know, classify and therefore be able to act on the world. Czarniawska-Joerges identifies three elements of this language:

> Managers tell their subordinates what is what (they label things), what things are like or what they could be like (they use metaphors), they tell them what is normal or acceptable (they utter platitudes). Labels, metaphors and platitudes are building blocks for more complex control machinery: world-views, philosophies, ideologies, cosmologies, business ideas. (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1990, p. 139)

Gurus' words appeal because of their strangeness and their familiarity – their capacity to be simultaneously banal and challenging. They surprise, they comfort, they disguise, they make connections between words and actions and deny the connection or present it as natural. They show that the guru knows - better than the client, the same as the client, differently from the client; they surprise. These stories work in two ways: solving mysteries or deconstructing certainties. Both indicate mastery and add value.

> Good consulting, like good theory and good art, emphasizes aspects of events and interpretative schema that may be, by themselves, quite misleading or overstated, but that leads in combination with what is accessible to ordinary knowledge, to improvements in understanding. From this perspective, the extent to which speculation is non-redundant in an interesting way is likely to be as important as whether it is precisely true . . . Thus, it calls for an appreciation of the role of surprise, evocativeness and beauty in interpretation. (March, 1984, p. 19, quoted in Czarniawska-Joerges, 1990, p. 149)

Words work by identifying necessary types of associated actions - costs (reduce!), value (add!), quality (improve!), customers (cherish!, increase!), etc. As a consequence, labels and words remove uncertainty and anxiety. Czarniawska-Joerges and Joerges (1990) make the point that gurus' words familiarize and make acceptable - lean production, downsizing, cost control, culture change.

> They objectivize, make strange into familiar, doubtful into obvious, and by involving values close the gaping door of the unknown. They can be seen as verbal rituals, utterances whose meaning lies in the act of repetition. They familiarize by relating concrete things or happenings to commonsensical generalizations. These characteristics of their functioning suggest a similarity between platitudes and rituals, both of them being linkages between a specific present and the accumulated past. (Czarniawska-Joerges and Joerges, 1990, p. 347)

The symbols that gurus manipulate in their work are presented to clients in the form of stories. This is how guru knowledge is displayed and it is also how gurus define the problems to be solved and outline relevant solutions. Through these stories gurus manage the display of their expertise through talk (i.e. they

tell tales) about organizational processes and functions. Their tales are of miraculous strategic virtuosity, of heroic organizational turn-rounds, of battles with organizational monsters (poor quality, poor service levels, huge inventories, etc.); about the necessary virtues for organizational success and how these virtues may be gained. Above all they are of the heroes/heroines who make success possible - the new manager.

Gurus' words and stories constitute, make up, the world they describe, in an open, interactive form, encouraging responses from clients, incorporating suggestions, working interactively with clients and audiences. The situation is not one where gurus impose meanings on managers; it is one of negotiation where gurus' success lies in reflecting and modifying managers' meanings. Mangham (1990, p. 107) remarks of managers' performance: 'A successful performance is the result of a triadic collusion between author, actor and audience . . . it must be remembered that the process is not one of interpreting followed by expressing, but a commingling of the two'. The 'production' (by gurus) and 'consumption' (by managers) of guru knowledge occurs simultaneously. 'Thus meaning is as much a product of acts of consumption as it could be of acts of production' (Jeffcutt, 1993, p. 23).

Gurus' stories in part claim authority by referencing other famous, successful, senior clients; to accepted values and assumptions within the political environment (enterprise) etc. They gain credibility by incorporating and legitimating the responses, values and views of their senior management audience. Legge (1996), following Latour (1987), argues that:

> Good consultancy stories are self-fortifying and well positioned - they anticipate and answer potential objections in advance. They are also interactive. They link claims to ideas the client already accepts; they develop the elements in the story progressively building on earlier assertions; and they ensure that the client draws the necessary and inevitable conclusions. There can be no room here for ambiguity. (Legge 1996, p. 4)

Bloomfield and Vurdubakis (1994) remark that a first step in making an issue manageable (subject to management understanding and action) is to frame it in such words and analysis that enable the problem and its solution to be clear and capable of being read by anyone who follows the argument. The benefit of the guru's stories must be clear and immediate or capable of being seen as contributing ultimately to problem solving. According to Legge:

> The consultant might seek to build a client base by doing away with potential clients' explicit interests: by redefining the problems presented; by inventing new problems; by seeking new clients and endowing them with problems for which the consultancy already has a packaged solution; by using strong rhetoric to render any detour invisible; by becoming indispensable. (Legge, 1996, p. 6)

Gurus' tales, as Legge (1996) notes, are inseparable from the rhetorics of persuasion, using labels to introduce order and certainty through giving names to things, and metaphors to break through the banal and commonplace, and create the promise of the new. They claim credibility and value by a variety of techniques. Bloomfield and Vurdubakis (1994, p. 460) note the brevity, layout and style of guru (consultancy) language and reports (the ubiquitous 'overheads'). The aim is to suggest economy, directness, 'to the point', non-wordy, 'strict economy in matters of communication, no verbiage, waffle, or waste, just plainly stated fact: reading a report takes time, time is money'. A useful finding must be stated in a way that it can be grasped immediately. By capturing the world of the organization succinctly and economically the guru demonstrates his or her commitment and capacity to achieve control over their subject matter in the same way that the manager aspires to achieve such mastery - in talk and in 'reality' (Bloomfield and Vurdubakis, 1994, p. 456).

These meanings and identities are produced and consumed through the interaction between guru and client. The manager does not docilely consume; the guru does not autocratically and manipulatingly produce. Guru activity, as Bloomfield and Vurdubakis (1994, p. 456) note, constitutes (does not 'reflect')

reality for consultants and their clients. Guru talk and reports function as intermediaries between the actors in the relationship, defining and associating heterogeneous entities (humans, technologies, institutions etc.) and thereby constructing the form and the substance of the relations set up between them. The organizational realities (structures, strategies, environments, scenarios, learning organizations, competences, etc.) which guru talk makes available for and accessible to management action and understanding is a textually constructed, known and described reality. The knowledge practices inherent in guru talk set up specific relations between and actions on the organizational features they describe. Guru talk and activity is the means through which management can understand and know and calculate, organizational structures and processes and thus the basis on which they

act to achieve compliance with their business objectives. In the process, management itself is re-defined.

Guru work introduces managers to ways of knowing organizations and their role within them; the key properties, processes, classes (`dogs', 'cash cows', 'task cultures', etc.) enable managers to make sense of the confusion of undifferentiated events and factors. This involves a two-way process: guru talk and reports achieve a textual ordering and classifying of the organization - identifying types, opportunities, challenges, weaknesses, etc., and define the 'real' world of the organization in terms of these textual analyses (Bloomfield and Vurdubakis, 1994).

Gurus' Narratives

By conceptualizing guru theory as a series of narratives which constitute the executive, we highlight the ways in which conceptions of person or roles - the business leader, the CEO - are inextricably linked with conceptions of, and ways of knowing and understanding - and changing - organizations. The business leader is constituted in contemporary guru theories of organization. And this process is strengthened by resonances between the qualities identified and celebrated in guru theories and wider moral, social and political conceptions of the nature of economies, organization and leadership - for example, the primacy of enterprise in a prevailing discourse of the market (see du Gay and Salaman, 1992; Rose, 1990).

One way in which gurus demonstrate their confident grasp of organizational ambiguities is by their certainty about the nature and role of the executive. Many writers have noted that gurus tend to share and reflect managers' values, and this unquestionably reinforces their appeal to senior managers. Others have noted that the power of current conceptions of the executive relate closely to wider social-political moralities of enterprise (du Gay and Salaman, 1992; Guest, 1990, 1992). But we are arguing something different here. The point is not that gurus and managers share a moral universe, but that gurus define the managerial role in terms of the executive's responsibility for managing meaning for their employees: creating employees' moral universe.

Organizational leaders, it seems, are concerned with managing meaning for subordinates. 'Leadership is realized in the process whereby one or more individuals succeeds in attempting to frame and define the reality of others' (Smircich and Morgan, 1982, p. 258). But this is also what gurus do, not simply in their published work but also powerfully in their public presentations. Smircich and Morgan's description of leaders' work could apply to gurus:

> The actions and utterances of leaders guide the attention of those involved in a situation in ways that are consciously or unconsciously designed to shape the meaning of the situation. The actions and utterances draw attention to particular aspects of the overall ¯ow of experience transforming what may be complex and ambiguous into something more discrete and vested with a specific pattern of meaning. (Smircich and Morgan, 1982, p. 261)

Gurus' narratives centre around two interrelated aspects of management: the managers' values and skills; and the role, status and identity of senior managers. In terms of the first narrative, two gurus - Deal and Kennedy (1982) – argue that: 'Since organization values can powerfully influence what people actually

do, we think that values ought to be a matter of great concern to managers. In fact, shaping and enhancing values can become the most important job a manager can do' (p. 32). And Tom Peters (1978, p. 10) remarks that 'symbols are the very stuff of management behaviour. Executives, after all, do not synthesize chemicals or operate fork lift trucks; they deal in symbols'.

In terms of the second narrative, gurus not only represent and define core management skills and attitudes (and values); they also define senior managers' roles and identities, and legitimize managers' status claims. They tell managers why they are important, why they matter, why their skills are critical. Wood (1989, p. 387) has noted that the appeal of guru ideas has as much to do with the 'forming of identities' as with 'the value of the technologies or organizational forms they propose'. Guru theory provides a new language which reconstructs managers' identities in accordance with the demands and needs of the enterprise culture. It is about redefining and reconstituting the subjectivities of managers.

The direct outcome of most contemporary guru programmes of organizational analysis - BPR, the 'learning organization', the delayered, flexible organization, performance management, TQM - is the reconstruction of the nature and contribution of senior managers. While the practices of management reproduce and transform organizations and organizational functioning; theories of organizational structure and functioning also transform and reproduce the modern manager. If management is 'above all a performing activity: it does what it says and it says what it does' (Clegg and Palmer, 1996, p. 2) then management itself is constituted by what management writers and theorists say organizations and managers are.

However, while the impact of these programmes on middle-level managers is increasingly the subject of academic analysis (du Gay, 1996; du Gay and Salaman, 1992; du Gay et al., 1996; Jackson, 1996a, b; Scarborough and Burrell, 1996) the impact of these guru theories and programmes on the making up of the senior executive has been relatively little studied and understood (Clark and Salaman, 1998; Salaman, 1997). Yet it is precisely these implications that may well help to explain the appeal of guru theory to senior managers. The writings of management gurus are rich and forceful enunciations of the necessary qualities of the new manager. For many the new executive assumes a moral character. Hammer and Champy remark: 'Reengineering capitalizes on the same characteristics that traditionally made Americans such great business innovators: individualism, self-reliance, a willingness to take risk, and a propensity for change' (Hammer and Champy, 1993, p. 3). Stephen Covey (The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People) also stresses the folk-spun morality of the executive. He requires that managers are capable of 'Working from the Inside Out', or of 'Finding true North' (Jackson, 1996b). For other gurus the new leader is more than a model of morality: s/he must also manage others' moralities. In supporting the 'learning organization' for example, leaders must 'define reality'. Senge (1990, p. 9) writes: 'Much of the leaverage leaders can actually exert lies in helping people achieve more accurate, more insightful, and more empowering views of reality.' And (Hammer and Champy, 1993, p. 103) also see the job of the executive as a 'visionary and motivator. By fashioning and articulating a vision of the kind of organization that he or she wants, the leader invests everyone in the company with a purpose and a sense of mission'.

Interestingly, while these heroic conceptions of the new, entrepreneurial manager contrast strikingly with images of the manager of 20 years ago - dull, grey, bureaucratic, unglamorous - they are strikingly similar to the conceptions of the manager of the early (entrepreneurial) industrial period. In 1835 Richard Ure = an early Ur-Peters - remarked: 'It required, in fact, a man of Napoleonic verve and ambition to subdue the refractory tempers of a work-people accustomed to irregular paroxysms of diligence' (Ure, quoted in Bendix, 1956, p. 59). Comments that could have been by any modern guru eulogist of management.

Gurus' tales create and demonstrate the manager in the course of a joint enterprise to know the organization. As a consequence, the ultimate object of guru work is not the client's organization, but the client as a manager. The gurus' role, and their appeal to managers, is that their stories simultaneously centre on and celebrate a new hero - the manager as corporate leader, as strategist, as saviour.

Jeffcutt (1994) has identified a number of essential narratives deployed by gurus (consultants) in re-interpreting the organization - as they 'seek to construct persuasive accounts of both the practice of organization and the theorization of organizational analysis' (Jeffcutt, 1994, p. 229).[3] In these stories, the heroic manager figure undertakes an arduous and perilous journey towards a compelling and portentous, if elusive, objective. 'The quest can thus be understood as a heroic process of passage through which the questor (seeker), and their world, becomes re-ordered and re-formed' (Jeffcutt, 1994, p. 229).

Gurus' narratives centre around two essential and moralized themes. In the first the organization is described, analysed and presented as an imagined community, where members and activities are integrated through shared beliefs, mutuality, consensus; where conflict is minimal, the organization is unified and harmonious and members accept the logic of difference and rank and accept their positions and their roles and rewards. Jeffcutt (1993, pp. 230-1) describes this as the 'Romantic' narrative. The second main narrative is the 'epic' narrative. Here the organization must make a perilous journey, through contested terrain to achieve ultimate salvation. The journey has three stages: initially the hero (the executive) is complacently unaware of the pressing dangers, seduced by inertia, history; secondly, having awakened, the hero in a condition of awareness seeks redemption; and finally, in the third stage, the questor achieves transformation through ordeal and commitment. As Jeffcutt (1993) notes in these 'epic' narratives, the management guru alerts the organization to the hideous perils that endanger the organization from within (e.g. existing work practices, poor quality) or without (e.g. competitor behaviour, costs, quality standards). 'Redemption occurs through the heroic [executive] struggle with these limitations (e.g. radical restructuring, transformations in employee and managerial effectiveness), and culminates in the organization's assertive rebirth and subsequent burgeoning' (Jeffcutt, 1994, p. 229).

Interestingly, and central to our argument here, in both these guru narratives - the rediscovery of the organization as imagined community, and the successful steering of the organization away from the perils of complacency through the agonies of rebirth - senior management is defined in a central, critical heroic, almost mystical role. In both narratives responsibility for successful outcomes and transformation lies with senior management: success depends on the charisma, vision, energy, courage of senior management. The stories define management.

Thus, gurus' knowledge displayed through their narratives offers representations not only of organizations' structures and processes and purpose to managers, but also within these representations, crucially, an identity for managers themselves. Gurus' overt point of concern is usually some central organizational process - strategy development, re-structuring, culture change, re-engineering, total quality, etc. But at the heart of the process, and centrally responsible for initiating and supporting the recommended programme of change, is an authoritative reinterpretation of senior management.

CONCLUSION

The approach offered here differs fundamentally from previous explanations in three ways. First, conventional explanations accept the reality of the management role and explain the impact of guru ideas in terms of fixed and unquestioned conceptions of the management role. Once this role is accepted as given, its demands and limitations (methods of working, social aspects, psychological pressures, needs for new forms of organization, etc.) are seen to predispose managers to be attracted to the content or form of gurus' messages. But the alternative explanation sketched here reverses this logic. Here guru theory is seen not to 'solve' managers' problems or to supply answers to their role pressures, but to constitute the role itself. The approach problematizes what the others take for granted. The role of the executive does indeed explain the appeal of guru theory, but not because guru theory solves executives' problems, but because the role itself is inscribed in gurus' ways of knowing and thinking about the organization itself.

Secondly, this approach deploys a contemporary approach to management which defines it not in terms of lists of responsibilities, accountabilities and tasks (and the implications of these for managers' susceptibilities to guru theory), but in terms of the language. Whereas conventional explanations define the manager's role in terms of duties and activities, the alternative approach argues, as Clegg and Palmer

(1996, p. 2) note: 'Most of what managers do is discursive; it consists of discussion, ordering, cajoling, pleading, condensing, summarizing, synthesizing, presenting, reporting - all activities that take place through the media of various texts and representations.' So too is the work of gurus, but guru discourse and activity, by focusing on the organization, also defines the manager.

Thirdly, this approach, in recognizing the historical specificity of conceptions of the management role - and associated qualities - rejects explanations in terms of the realities and pressures of the management role and seeks to locate current conceptions of this role in forms of discourse of organizations and strategy which achieve a taken-for-granted quality through their resonances with wider social-political discourses of market and enterprise, and which are reproduced and relayed through the critical intermediary activities of management gurus. To understand the ways in which guru theory constitutes the modern executive it is necessary to analyse how such theory works.

This article is addressed to a review of available explanations of the impact of management gurus on their senior management clients. It has assembled a number of available explanations, most of which were developed originally as part of debates addressing different problematics but which have here been used as a potential basis for explanations of guru impact. Part of the contribution of the paper is that it identifies and maps the main explanatory models that have been used or could be used to account for the appeal and impact of management gurus' ideas and performances.

In the final section of the paper a tentative alternative approach is outlined. This is presented as a promising, if as yet largely untested approach to the explanation of the impact of management gurus - an approach which is, however, beginning to attract support and attention.[4] The merit of this approach, is that it is largely free from the criticisms that have been levelled at earlier approaches: that they define the manager as a passive, uncritical, vulnerable, and exploited consumer of guru ideas and recommendations; that the flow of ideas is one way (gurus to manager); that they are uncertain about the nature of the benefits management receives from the transaction; that they rely on an academic conception of knowledge.

The alternative type of explanation defined the client-guru relationship in equal and interactive terms where both benefit from and contribute to the relationship. Here it was suggested that gurus' role and success lies in their supporting management work and reducing uncertainty, not in terms of their expert professional knowledge but in terms of their competence at managing meanings - a quality managers admire because this is the essence of their work.

The argument presented in later sections of this paper goes beyond a conception of the guru as simply resolving managers' problems (even of identity). In this article we offer an explanation of gurus' success which is based in their function in defining the management role itself, and its associated tasks and responsibilities and competences. One of the unremarked aspects of the successful guru - and a

major reason for their success - is the way in which guru work with clients builds a conception of the nature and importance of the manager in a way that would have been inconceivable 20 years ago where managers and management were, if anything, regarded negatively. Today the manager is a hero or heroine. As Burrell (1989, p. 308) notes of guru literature: 'In Sir Karl Popper's terms . . . all this kind of book does is to reinforce the mystique of leadership.'

By their stories which resonate with managers' values, and which describe what organizations are like, how they work, and how they must be managed, gurus offer a conception of management itself in virtuous, heroic, high status terms. Guru activity, with their management clients therefore not only constitutes organizational realities, it constitutes managers themselves.

NOTES

[1] The majority of these individuals are American. It may be that there are certain features of American society which support the development of management gurus and guru theory. These may include the focus on a dream, an idealized sense of possibility (Guest, 1992), the assumption that individuals are adaptable to a dynamic and changing future (Abrahamson, 1996), the relatively poor performance of

American organizations in the face of (mainly) Japanese and south-east Asian competition, and the gradual historical emergence of a conviction of the inherent inadequacy, even dangers, of conventional US management techniques and the need to (re)discover (borrow) new principles of organization.

[2] These books are so critical to legitimizing the guru's ideas and in gaining an audience that some gurus have been accused of manipulating the best-seller lists by establishing intricate buying networks for purchasing copies of their own books (Business Week, 1995).

[3] Other writers have offered frameworks for the analysis of guru narratives. Jackson (1996b) uses the work of Ernest Bormann (1972) to develop some fantasy themes inherent in the work of Stephen Covey. Clark and Salaman (1998) have identified three meta-narratives in culture change programmes. Rouleau and Seguin (1995) have identified a number of forms of strategic discourse each of which establishes a

different narrative relationship between environment, organization and individual.

[4] To date there has been relatively little systematic attention paid to explaining the remarkable impact and power of management gurus' theories and prescriptions about organizations and organizational restructuring, which is surprising since these theories have been highly significant in determining recent and current programmes of organizational change. Furthermore, understanding the factors accounting for guru success and impact may enable academics to successfully intervene in the management fashion-setting process. The limited research which does exist has primarily focused on (1) textual analyses of guru publications (Fincham, 1995; Gerlach, 1996; Grint, 1994; Jackson, 1996b; Jeffcutt, 1994); and, (2) the psychological appeal of gurus for managers (Huczynski, 1993a, b; Watson, 1994a, b).

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