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Management research on fashion: A review and evaluation

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Brad Jackson

Management gurus and management fashions: A dramatistic inquiry. London: Routledge, 2001. £18.99, 208 pp.

Patrick Thomas

Fashions in management research: An empirical analysis. Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999. £45.00, 256 pp.

Denis Saint-Martin

Building the new managerialist state: Consultants and the politics of public sector reform in comparative perspective. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. £45.00, 247 pp.

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Introduction

In recent years there has been growing interest and debate amongst scholars with respect to the notion that management ideas are subject to recurrent swings in fashion in the same way that aesthetic aspects of life, such as clothing styles and musical tastes, are characterized by surges of popularity and then decline. A number of reasons for the increasing importance of management fashion as an area of research have been identified. First, each wave of fashionable thinking in management is seen as altering accepted definitions of the character of the modern organizational ideal with the consequence that few people who work in organizations remain untouched by the consequence of the implementation of a fashionable idea.

Second, some commentators have highlighted the need to explain and understand a puzzling paradox. Managers' enthusiasm for unproven conjecture continues unabated despite critical exposés in the popular press and academic research indicating that management ideas and techniques proclaimed as 'new' and 'revolutionary' do not deliver what they promise and indeed can do more harm than good (e.g. Carson et al., 2000; Clark & Salaman, 1998).

Third, management fashion is seen as a potential threat to the role of academics in that 'scholars might lose ground and their traditional authoritative role over management knowledge might further diminish' (Abrahamson & Eisenman, 2001: 68). This is because of the emergence of a market in which management knowledge is increasingly viewed as a lucrative commodity and as a source of profit, and into which entrepreneurial management-knowledge suppliers enter and compete successfully with scholars in the creation and dissemination of knowledge to consumers (i.e. practising managers). If the knowledge produced by management scholars is perceived to be lagging rather than leading management progress their influence will decline. This suggests that the legitimacy of groups may rise and fall along with the ideas they propound and that academics are one of the most vulnerable groups in this process.

The proliferation of conference papers, symposia, published articles, books and the publication of special issues on management fashion in Journal of Management History (1999) and Organization (2000) indicate that the study of management fashion has itself become a fashionable area of academic inquiry. In terms of the fashion cycle it has been going through a period of rapid growth and may soon be reaching its peak. It is therefore an appropriate time to review three recently published research monographs on the subject. This review will describe the conceptual frameworks and research findings of each book prior to an evaluation of their strengths and weaknesses. The review concludes with some general comments on the state of scholarship in management fashion research as exemplified by these books.

Management gurus and management fashions

In his seminal model of the management fashion setting process, Abrahamson (1996: 257) defined management fashion as 'a relatively transitory collective belief, disseminated by management fashion setters, that a management technique leads to rational progress'. Groups of interrelated knowledge entrepreneurs and industries, identified as management consultants, management gurus, business schools and mass media organizations, are characterized as being in a 'race' to sense managers' emergent collective preferences for new techniques. They then develop rhetorics which 'convince fashion followers that a management technique is both rational and at the forefront of managerial progress' (Abrahamson, 1996: 267). Their rhetorics must therefore articulate why it is imperative that managers should pursue certain organizational goals and why their particular technique offers the best means to achieve these goals. Thus, within this model the management fashion setting community is viewed as supplying audiences with ideas and techniques that have the potential for developing mass followings. These may or may not become fashions depending on fashion setters' ability to redefine fashion followers' collective beliefs about which management techniques are state of the art and meet their immediate needs. The first book examined in this review is concerned with the activities of a group that many commentators regard as currently the most influential members of the management fashion setting community in that through their best-selling books they dominate contemporary notions of the organizational ideal and the nature of the management role – management gurus.

The main purpose of Brad Jackson's endeavours in Management gurus and management fashions is to analyse the rhetorical appeal of three management fashions that emerged during the 1990s – re-engineering, effectiveness and the learning organization. For Jackson management gurus are the progenitors of powerful management ideas that are characterized by bell-shaped swings in popularity. Hence, they 'invent' ideas that fail to become firmly entrenched and institutionalized because managers and organizations are attracted to them for a period and then abandon them in favour of apparently newer and potentially more promising ones. Following Huczynski (1993), he argues that their ideas are founded on one of three sources – academic research, consultancy work and management experience. Depending on which of these sources predominates, three types of management guru can be distinguished: 'academic gurus' (e.g. Charles Handy, Rosabeth Moss Kanter, Peter Senge), 'consultant gurus' (e.g. Michael Hammer, Tom Peters, Robert Waterman) and 'hero managers' (e.g. John Harvey Jones, Lee Iacocca, Jack Welch) (pp. 9–13). Finally, they are experts in persuasive communication and popularize their ideas through best-selling books, articles in the high circulation business journals, live presentations on the international lecture circuit and in video training programmes.

Jackson's study focuses on the rhetorical appeal of management fashions for, he argues, it is this factor which accounts for the 'emergence and predominance of just a few particular fashions over many others that are competing for the manager's attention at any given period of time' (p. 39). Although this element has been examined previously by a number of scholars, Jackson's approach is different. Rather than conceiving of rhetoric in very general terms as the 'sizzle' that 'oils the wheels' between producers and consumers of management ideas,

he adopts an analytical framework (termed fantasy theme analysis (FTA)) in order to identify the specific rhetorical elements that account for the popularity of a particular idea.

FTA is a method of rhetorical criticism developed in the 1970s by Ernest Bormann and his colleagues at the Department of Communication at the University of Minnesota. Central to this approach is the notion of 'group fantasy events'. These are created when someone mentions a topic, an event or an experience that causes a chain reaction within the group in that it captures their combined attentions and becomes the focus of multiple animated (re)tellings. It is at these moments that the energy, tempo and volume of conversation increase as the group focuses on a common preoccupation. For Bormann these 'dramatizing moments' which ripple out within small face-to-face groups can also occur in larger dispersed groups through the technologies of the mass media. For this to happen the dramas which originally excited the members of a group have to be shaped to meet the needs of specific communication contexts so that they catch members of the target audience. As these dramas spread across larger groups of people they 'serve to sustain the members' sense of community, to impel them strongly to action . . . and to provide them with social reality filled with heroes, villains, emotions and attitudes' (Bormann, 1972: 398). The composite dramas that capture the attention of large groups of people are termed 'fantasy visions' which are in turn constructed from 'fantasy themes'. It is these themes that generate commitment to the vision by catching up a group and causing a dramatized moment to spread 'because it hits a common psychodynamic chord or a hidden agenda item or their common difficulties vis-à-vis the natural environment, the sociopolitical systems, or the economic structures' (Bormann, 1972: 399).

Prior to this book, FTA had been applied within communication studies to a diverse range of communication contexts including political, religious, organizational, mass, interpersonal and small group, and public relations. Jackson's study therefore represents the first application of the method within a management research context. The materials on which his analysis is based include the seminal books, video and cassette recordings of each guru's live speeches, articles written by the gurus in the academic and popular business press, and media commentaries on the management gurus and their ideas. His systematic application of FTA to these artefacts reveals that the fantasy themes of each of the three rhetorical visions with which he is concerned varied in number, mix and type. For example, with respect to re-engineering the themes focused directly on the concerns of managers and encouraged them to: (i) fundamentally re-examine their role ('preservation of self'); (ii) change to meet the requirements of the new organization ('redemption of self'); and (iii) redefine the nature of the managerial character within the re-engineered organization ('representation of self'). In contrast the themes undergirding the rhetorical vision of the effectiveness movement were largely from outside the corporate world. In this case they drew on: (i) an idealized representation of an agricultural past ('back to the farm'); (ii) the notion that personal effectiveness is derived from change which is self focused ('working from the insideout'); and (iii) a conception of finding a sense of direction, purpose and balance by locating an internal 'moral compass' ('finding true North'). Jackson extends Bormann's framework and in the process deepens his analysis of each fashionable idea by identifying the root metaphorical structure, which he terms 'master analogue', upon which each of the rhetorical visions is based. He concludes that the analogue for re-engineering is essentially pragmatic (i.e. 'it is your only choice'), whereas the one for effectiveness is righteous ('it is the right thing to do') and that for the learning organization is social (i.e. 'it is a good thing to do').

Both the strengths and weaknesses of the book lie in its use of a novel conceptual framework. With respect to the latter, whether the book will convert people to the method so that FTA itself becomes a fashionable research method is unlikely. As the book demonstrates, to be successful rhetorical visions have to be immediately comprehensible by their intended audiences. Those sections devoted to articulating the method are a particularly difficult read. Also the fantasy themes and master analogues for each vision are presented and discussed without reference to the analytical processes that lead to their extraction from the empirical material. Without knowing the basis for their identification, the appeal of the themes seems curious. Furthermore, they appear free-floating with

the consequence that is difficult to see the connections between, for example, re-engineering's emphasis on self and its underlying pragmatic orientation. A related weakness is the failure to conduct a detailed comparison of the rhetorical visions. Interesting, but unexamined, questions include – are the visions equally persuasive? Do they appeal to similar audiences? What is the linkage between the persuasiveness of particular fantasy themes and the socio-political context in which they emerged? Are some fantasy themes more long lasting than others, and, if so, why?

Despite these deficiencies, Jackson's adoption of FTA does produce additional insights into the appeal of these three fashionable ideas. He also shows that despite their different fantasy themes each rhetoric vision spoke to their audience's common concerns by: (i) indicating its ability to overcome managers' most pressing difficulties; and (ii) convincing managers that each was the best means for achieving this. In revealing the rhetorical structure supporting these three popular ideas, this book shows how academic ideas can be presented more effectively to a managerial audience. Perhaps by taking note of these points academics may begin to convince the management community that it is they, and not management gurus, who are at the forefront of managerial innovation.

Management academics and fashions

Like Jackson's book, Fashions in management research by Patrick Thomas is also an empirical study of fashionable management ideas, but it differs from the previous book in that the focus is not on ideas targeted primarily at managers, but rather those used by academics. This book is therefore a study of fashions within management research in that it 'focuses explicitly upon the influence of management fashions upon the management research community' (p. 27).

The central concern of the book is to determine the influence of different ideas within management research. In so doing, Thomas seeks to differentiate between those ideas whose influence has been transitory and those that have had a lasting impact on the field. To achieve this he has to tackle two key issues. The first is to select a method which will identify the life cycle of different ideas and, the second is to identify the range of ideas that will be included in the analysis. With respect to the first issue, Thomas chooses to use citation analysis. He argues that counting the number of times a particular work is cited within the community of management scholars can determine its influence. As he writes 'the greater the number of citations received by a particular published item, the more influential it is assumed to be' (p. 29). With respect to the second difficulty, he selected for analysis 314 publications written by the 81 authors included in three reviews of the organization theory (Kennedy, 1991; Pugh & Hickson, 1964–89; Shafritz & Whitbeck, 1979). Unlike previous studies of management fashion, the publications included were not limited to articles but also included books.

Analysis of the citation data from the Social Science Citation Index (SSCI) revealed that, with respect to longevity, the life cycles for literature in the data set ranged from 14.5 years to 44.9 years with a mean of around 25 years. Furthermore, the life cycles for recent ideas were shorter than those for older ideas. More recent ideas therefore have less staying power. In terms of influence Thomas concludes that 'most literature, even that published by leading authors, has relatively little influence on the management research community. Only a small proportion of the literature may be defined as highly influential' (p. 131). A qualitative analysis of the 38 most influential texts, reveals a number of factors which differentiates this group from the less influential. First, they are nearly all books rather than journal articles. Second, the authors are based at North American rather than European institutions. Third, these authors tend to be writing from either a sociological or psychological perspective. Finally, the authors have all published more than one book. He argues that the number of items published by an author increases their influence as there is a continuing body of work to which researchers must refer.

The book suffers from several serious methodological deficiencies that limit the strength and scope of its findings. One aspect of this is Thomas's total reliance on the decisions made by the authors of three source books as to which individuals they consider to have reached a certain level of influence and so are worthy of the label 'leading thinker' in management studies. Whether or not their choices include the full range of areas within management is not considered. Although this reviewer is only familiar with the contents of two of these books, the list of authors included in the study indicates that some important areas of organizational theory, including accounting, finance and strategy, are under-represented. A further problem arises as a consequence of using the SSCI. Excluded from the analysis are a number of authors whose work was published before 1956, the year in which the SSCI starts. Although some works published before 1956 are little cited within the SSCI after that date, establishing a cut-off date nevertheless means that some very influential work is excluded from the study including that of Chester Bernard, Frederick Taylor, Max Weber and the Hawthorne Studies. The continuing impact of these writers and studies on each generation of management researchers is undeniable and suggests a major flaw with the method employed.

Despite these serious methodological problems, the book is very readable and full of interesting information and ideas that will contribute to the literature on management fashion. It shifts the emphasis away from the current dominant approach of examining those ideas disseminated to managers to a focus on fashion within academia. The book therefore encourages us to be reflexive in our research endeavours and to acknowledge that management theory, and the examination of management fashion, is equally predisposed to shifts in taste. Although, as management researchers, we may criticize managers for the rapid waxing and waning of their commitment to a steady stream of unproven and speculative ideas, this book suggests that we as academics are not immune to such processes. We too become bewitched by areas of research that appear very appealing but subsequently fail to live up to expectations and contribute little to the advancement of knowledge. Another merit-worthy feature of the book is the strong linkage made between the literature on the theory of aesthetic fashion and management fashion. Research on management fashion has generally failed explicitly to draw on earlier conceptual and empirical work on aesthetic fashion. Thus, the two literatures, although related, have remained unconnected. Finally, the book critically examines a number of elements present in every analysis of management fashion. Of particular importance are the discussions relating to citation analysis and the notion that the life span of all ideas is characterized by a bell-shaped curve.

Management fashions in the public sector

In Building the new managerialist state Denis Saint-Martin examines the role of a second important group of fashion setters – management consultants - with respect to public sector reform and the rise of 'new managerialism' in three countries – Britain, Canada and France. The central aim of the book is 'to understand why the changes produced by the new managerialism on public administration have been more radical and profound in some countries than in others' (p. 2). Three broad approaches to explaining the rise of new managerialist ideas and policy change in public administration are identified. The first, termed the 'ideological' approach, links the emergence and diffusion of managerialist ideas to the rise of the New Right in the 1980s. The second, termed the 'structural' approach, links the rise of managerialism to the process of economic globalization and to developments in information technology. On the basis of a critical examination of these two approaches the book develops a third, newer, approach which stresses the active role of management consultants in disseminating managerialist policies into the public sector. Accordingly, new managerialism is viewed as an inevitable outcome of the material interests of consultants. Following Hood (1991: 9) it is conceived as 'a vehicle for particularist advantage' and as a 'self-serving movement designed to promote the career interests of an elite group of New Managerialists' – management consultants.

To understand the factors accounting for cross-nation variation in the reception of new managerialist ideas within the three countries an explanatory framework is developed which draws on a historical-institutionalist perspective. This stresses the links between the state and less formal organizations (i.e. management consultants) in the determination of policy. In this framework three separate elements are identified. First, the extent to which governments draw on consultancy expertise and knowledge is seen as related to the state of development of the consultancy industry and whether it has acquired a 'good' reputation. More particularly, if consultants are to advise the state on the importation of business management ideas, then their general standing within the private sector is viewed as critical. Second, to become policy, ideas have to reach the attention of key decision makers within national governments. This is seen as being dependent upon the relative openness of policy-making institutions to knowledge and expertise from outside the state and the extent to which external agents have access to central decision-making. These two factors are in turn mediated by the third element in the model – the experience of policy actors with past bureaucratic reforms and policies (termed 'policy legacy'). Thus policy making is considered an 'inherently historical process in which actors define their responses to a particular policy on the basis of their prior experience with similar measures' (p. 31). These experiences either facilitate or impede reform.

On the basis of the systematic application of this framework to the three countries, Saint-Martin concludes that managerialist ideas have been less influential in France than in Britain and Canada. The book demonstrates that the management consultancy industry has been most developed in Britain and Canada. This is related in part to the emergence of large international accountancy firms – the progenitors of the largest and most influential management consultancies – in these countries in the 1960s. This did not happen in France until the 1980s. In addition, the appointment of key civil servants to the government divisions within consulting firms and consultants to critical government posts has underpinned the greater acceptance of consultancy knowledge by the state in Britain and Canada than France. However, a critical difference between Britain and Canada is the extent to which consultants have had direct access to decision-making centres. Consequently, managerialist ideas have not been equally influential in the two countries. Saint-Martin concludes that the opportunities for consultants to help shape Canadian government policy with respect to managerial reform have been limited. This is because the managerialist solutions they advocate are packaged and mediated by the Office of the Auditor General (OAG) and then often presented in ways that are not politically popular with the government. In contrast, in the UK after 1979 responsibility for bureaucratic reform was located under the direct political control of the Prime Minister in the Cabinet Office's Efficiency Unit. This body was staffed by ex-consultants and actively sought external advice with the consequence that management consultants had direct access at the political level of Cabinet with respect to bureaucratic reform. With respect to France, Saint-Martin argues that public sector reform has been focused at the local government level. He concludes that although managerialist ideas have emerged at the local level they have yet to impact significantly on the centre as consultants have found it difficult to leverage local government relationships to penetrate the administrative institutions of central government.

Clearly, the consultant-centred approach by itself is not comprehensive enough to explain the relative impact of new managerialism within the three countries. It excludes a number of important factors which have created a receptive climate for such ideas. These include the prevailing socio-political context, the impact of new technology, fiscal crises and broader pressures arising from globalization. Admittedly, Saint-Martin's aim is not to conduct a broad and integrated analysis of the different explanations for the rise of new managerialism. Rather, his purpose is to focus exclusively on an area that has been previously overlooked. Although an acceptable approach, the book would nevertheless have benefited from greater linkages being made between its findings and those of studies from alternative explanatory approaches. Without this its broader contribution is unclear. The book also perpetuates a simplistic and one-way conception of the client-consultant relationship. Consultants are portrayed as the dominant, initiating partners who exploit the naiveté and vulnerability of their clients. Civil servants and managers, in contrast, are conceived largely as passive, docile consumers of consultants' ideas and

recommendations. Saint-Martin seems to imply that consultant advice and packages are accepted willingly and uncritically, with little modification from their previous private sector applications. Yet, as many readers will be aware, a much more critical atmosphere with respect to the work conducted by consultants in the public sector is emerging. After the failure of a number of high profile projects and an increasing awareness of their cost to the taxpayer, their activities have entered the public consciousness and are now subject to closer and more critical scrutiny (for example, see NAO, 2001). The reputational consequences have been such that some consultancies, rather than viewing the public sector as a 'golden opportunity', have withdrawn altogether.

Despite these problems, the book is very readable with an accessible style and tone. The systematic application of the conceptual framework to each country, combined with a superior level of empirical detail, ensures that the ambitious aims are fully met. Consequently, the book broadens and deepens our understanding of the activities of this group of fashion setters by shining a spotlight on a previously overlooked, and increasingly important, area of their work.

Discussion

These three books demonstrate that the guiding principle of Human Relations for the last 54 years – towards the integration of the social sciences – is alive and well in research on management fashions. Each of these books enhances our understanding of the management fashion process by drawing on and fusing together a broad range of conceptual approaches. Although the books reviewed here generally present some unique and insightful empirical material, they also suffer from a number of shortcomings that limit their individual contributions to the area. At the same time they build on and perpetuate several general deficiencies that are endemic to this area of research. These require urgent attention if further progress is to made.

Of greatest importance, and present in the books by Jackson and Thomas, is the continuing conflation of the popularity of ideas with their impact. The literature tends to assume that there is a relationship between the pattern in the volume of 'discourse' and trends in the adoption and rejection of ideas. Except in very rare cases in which surveys of the diffusion of ideas across organizations are used (e.g. Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999: 717), measures of popularity are employed as proxies for impact. This arises because of a fixation with citation analysis as the method for determining the life cycle of ideas. Key word searches of electronic databases are conducted in order to measure the number of articles in any one year which contain the search terms. Yet despite its almost universal use, citation analysis is not without serious problems. Unless each article is read it cannot indicate whether the idea was central or peripheral to the main topic or whether it was referred to positively or negatively. But, of greater importance is whether citation analysis actually captures the impact of particular ideas within organizations. Citation analysis is limited to the counts of references to an idea in selected sections of the print media, mainly leading academic journals, semi-academic journals and the popular management press. By using this method, the management fashion literature is concerned not with the organizational implications of management fashions but with measuring the amount of 'noise' generated in the print media with respect to particular ideas. It therefore reports not on the extent to which ideas impact on organizations but the extent to which elements of the print media are captivated with a particular management idea at any one time. Future research needs to give much greater emphasis to the patterns of reception or rejection of ideas within organizations. Whether this can be achieved is linked to a point made earlier. At present the literature is dominated by investigations of fashion setters with the consequence that there is a tendency to view the relationship between these groups and their audiences[1] as one-sided. There is an implicit assumption in much of this research that fashion setters are the dominant party and that audiences are passive and compliant recipients. Analyses based on such assumptions are clearly unsatisfactory. What is needed is a more balanced conception of

the relationship between the two parties and this will only emerge if researchers devote more of their efforts to those on the 'receiving end' of management fashions.

Second, the picture that emerges from these books is one in which managers are portrayed as being the sole arbiters of taste in that it is they who are presented as selecting between ideas that have potential for mass appeal and so determine which ones become fashionable and which do not. Management fashion setters, in contrast, are depicted as lone creative geniuses who gain unique insights into modern organizational life by dabbling in their 'organizational laboratories', who then emerge and use their expertise in rhetoric and persuasive communication to popularize their ideas through best-selling books, articles in the popular business press, live presentations on the international lecture circuit and consultancy packages. Thus, managers as the primary audience are portrayed as responsible for the selection of those ideas which subsequently become management fashions, whereas fashion setters are pictured as the sole creators and processors of the ideas for which they are known.

But, management ideas, like other cultural products, 'do not spring forth full blown but are made somewhere by somebody' (Peterson, 1979: 152). The displayed character of a potentially fashionable management idea at the dissemination stage is the result of active collaboration at earlier stages between the creator(s) and a range of support personnel. In this sense, management ideas are 'collective social products' which depend for their realization on reciprocal collaboration between a group of people. For example, with respect to management books, perhaps the most widely disseminated source of management ideas, prior to their publication, the author's original ideas are moulded and refined in collaboration with book editors (Clark & Greatbatch, in press). This group of support personnel collaborate with the author in order to turn their ideas into products that are likely to be successful with the intended audience. It is their initial decision to support an author that either facilitates or blocks the career of a would-be guru. At the dissemination stage, therefore, the management audience chooses from a prerestricted menu of ideas that have been pre-selected on the basis of their blockbuster potential and have subsequently been carefully crafted in order to increase their likelihood of success. Thus the popularity and success of a particular idea cannot simply be understood in terms of the special qualities of the fashion setter. Management scholars should therefore abandon their essentially individualistic conceptions of the development and dissemination of 'fashionable' ideas in the corporate marketplace. Instead, they should focus increasingly on the ways in which such ideas emerge as the result of a series of collaborative relationships with a number of usually unseen heads and hands, whose roles have previously been overlooked and so are presently little understood.

Notes:

1. Although the focus here is on managers, in actuality the audience for management ideas is much broader and includes management consultants, trainers, video production companies, and so forth. These groups in turn reconstitute management ideas in terms of the presentational conventions within their own domain, and then disseminate them to managers. They therefore have an important mediating function.

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