Scientification, immune responses, and reflection

The changing relationship between management studies and consulting

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Abstract

Purpose – There is little consensus among academics on how to treat management fashions. The aim of this paper is to point out how management scientists have previously dealt with consulting concepts and which ways of dealing with them seem to be appropriate.

Design/methodology/approach – The debate surrounding management fashions alludes to the topic, how academia demarks its borders. Thus, a concept is required with which management studies and practice can be described as distinct entities in order to juxtapose the two spheres. This is done by applying Niklas Luhmann's systems theory to the realm of management studies.

Findings – The development of academia's attitude toward consulting concepts can be subdivided into three different phases: management academics considered consulting concepts as quasi-scientific element; these concepts were then interpreted as a "foreign body": and, finally, they were an object of scientific reflection. The last phase includes a transformation that has started only recently. From the perspective of the theory of self-referential systems this change can be described as a sound development and it seems unlikely that academic approaches and consulting concepts will converge. In this perspective the non-academic character of such consultancy-concepts becomes evident-just like their hidden usefulness.

Originality/value – Provides insights on how management scientists deal appropriately with consulting concepts. The change in attitude towards fashionable management concepts provides information not only about the consultancy concepts, but also about an altered self-conception of management studies.

Keywords Organizational change, Management activities, Management theory

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

One might think there were no great differences between management academics and consultants. Even if their emphasises differ – the former are obliged to search for the truth while the latter are more strongly governed by profit-seeking – both groups try to build up and further develop knowledge bases useful to the improvement of managerial practice. In this respect, management academics and consultants share a common mission.

However, the relationship between scientists and consultancies is not as harmonic as it often seems to be at first sight. This becomes particularly clear by examining the researchers' comments on consulting concepts. While some researchers welcome the dissemination of these concepts, most researchers ignore or even criticize them,

and a few scientists seem to be outright hostile to consulting concepts which are frequently called "management fashions".

Management fashions have been subject to growing debate in recent years in both academic (Abrahamson, 1996a; Kieser, 1997; Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999) and practitioner-oriented discourse (Byrne, 1986; Micklethwait and Wooldridge, 1996; Eccles and Nohria, 1992). One could also talk about the "fashionization of the topic of management fashion" (Newel *et al.*, 2001, p. 6). In general, there seems to be little consensus among academics on how to treat management fashions. It is the purpose of this paper to point out how management scientists have previously dealt with consulting concepts and which ways of dealing with them seem to be appropriate.

On the one hand, consultants hardly establish a connection between the development of their fashionable concepts and scientific discourse. Instead, some recurring (non-academic) rhetorical elements of management fashions can be found in the literature (Kieser, 1997; Røvik, 1996; Furusten, 1995). These include promises of substantial performance enhancement, the threat of bankruptcy in case of non-adoption, using well-known and successful applicants of the particular concept, universal applicability, easy-to-understand, a catchy title, and leaving a certain amount of room for interpretation.

On the other hand, academia has an interest in fashionable management concepts since they have high practical relevance (Dean and Bowen, 1994, p. 393). The popularity of fashionable management concepts in fact contrasts with academic discourse, which is virtually ignored by practitioners (Hambrick, 1994). Therefore, the relationship between academic discourse and popular management concepts is tense, possibly even antagonistic (March, 1991, p. 22). In this connection the term "fashion" clearly has pejorative connotations.

In the following we demonstrate how the relationship between management studies and consulting concepts has changed in the last decades. Three different phases of academic attitudes towards management fashions can be distinguished. In the first phase the communication system of academia regarded management concepts as quasi-scientific elements, in the second phase as a foreign body, and in the third, which is just beginning to dawn, as an object of scientific reflection.

The debate surrounding management fashions alludes to the topic, how academia demarks its borders. Thus, the changing attitude towards the fashionable consulting concepts also reflects a change in the self-conception of management studies. In the next step a concept is required with which management studies and practice can be described as distinct entities in order to juxtapose the two spheres. This is done by applying Niklas Luhmann's systems theory (1995) to the realm of management studies.

Management fashions – three different views
Management fashions as a quasi-scientific element
In the first phase, which we consider here, management fashions were not discussed explicitly. The form in which management knowledge was created and which methods were applied or which kind of language was used was deemed to be of little consequence. It was not so important to bring the fashionable management concept into the format of a scientific publication in order to be scientifically accepted.

The different sub-fields of management studies, such as organization theory, human resource management or marketing management, show a different degree of maturity. Thus, the periods of time in which management fashions are regarded as a quasi-scientific element differ from sub-discipline to sub-discipline.

The field of strategic management serves as an example. In 1960s strategic management was in transition from a teaching course in business policy tradition to a research course. An attempt was made to go beyond the knowledge, which consisted mainly of check-lists, schemata, and case studies. The aim was to make the discipline a respectable science. In particular, that meant: empirical studies, mainly of a quantitative nature. Following the example set by the natural sciences both, academics and consultants, sought to identify universally applicable laws (Schendel and Hofer, 1979). In this early phase of strategic management it seemed that strategy consultants in particular had extensive knowledge at their disposal. The different variants of the portfolio analysis developed by the Boston Consulting Group, McKinsey, Arthur D. Little, etc. as well as the ambitious, empirical PIMS project which was designed to discover the "laws of the market-place" (Buzzell and Gale, 1987) became especially prominent. Orientation towards natural sciences becomes most apparent if one looks at the logarithmic downward sloping arm of the experience curve developed by Henderson (1974). This consultancy tool had an enormous influence on the strategy development of many companies in 1970s. It is still in use.

Gälweiler's (1990) (an academic) statement concerning the German translation of Henderson's book on the experience curve reflects the hope for "scientification" that was attributed to these tools:

> For the very first time concrete factor constellations for corporate strategy can be comprehended and discussed. Up to now most publications on corporate strategy indicate how helpless one was confronted with related problems in the past; and also the many – up to now – hardly successful endeavours in corporate planning (…). The fundamental importance of the publication of the Boston Consulting Group and related research will increase rather than decrease.

In this phase the context in which consulting knowledge was created and applied was not reflected. Consultancy knowledge was built into academic communication as a quasi-scientific element. This perspective includes the assumption that (quasi-)scientific knowledge is superior. In this view the tools undoubtedly made a contribution to the rationalization of managerial practice. The rather uncritical attitude of the academic community towards management tools dominated this phase and was reinforced through the successful dissemination of these concepts. According to the "better mousetrap theory", which is widespread among social scientists, the great popularity of a tool is a clear indication of its superiority. This theory was formulated by Emerson and is based on a simple suction effect:

> If a man can write a better book, preach a better sermon, or make a better mousetrap than his neighbour, though he builds his house in the woods, the world will make a beaten path to his door (Emerson cited after Caplan, 1983, p. 256).

From this perspective the positive contribution of consulting concepts to corporate performance is already perceptible from the fact that they have been accepted by a large number of companies (Marcus et al., 1995). This idea predominates among management academics in particular since it corresponds to rational choice theory

and the market-efficiency assumption. The market is regarded as a process through which inefficiencies are eliminated and innovation is encouraged. According to the better mousetrap theory the best management innovations gain acceptance as a result of fair competition. Indeed, right up to today strategy theorists appeal to the "market test" to legitimize management concepts. By using this argument Wensley (1994, p. 85), for instance, defended the popular portfolio-analysis after it had been, at least to some extent, severely criticized:

> How do we choose the appropriate management techniques to proselytise? [. . .] As marketing academics we might argue that the test of popularity is indeed a form of market test: as such no other additional questions need to be asked.

This argument helped the widespread consulting concepts to gain the status of a quasi-scientific element. These concepts were regarded as a part of science produced by non-academics. Consequently, managers were considered as addressees of "salvation lessons". Practitioners applying the popular tools provided evidence that they are able to run a company according to the state-of-the-art of management. The management concepts served to contribute to the professionalization of their actions.

Management fashions as a foreign body
In the second phase the term "management fashion" was coined, first of all by the popular business press (Byrne, 1986), and only later on in the scientific community. The term "fashion" is used as a vehicle for a number of critical objections to popular management concepts. The criticism expresses itself as an attempt at demystification. Criticizing a concept as fashion entails disparaging the non-scientific nature of the particular concepts. Academic criticism usually centers on the following points.

- *Mystification and vague definitions.* Many management techniques contain a lot of "buzz words", "hot buttons", or "catch words", which give the impression of novelty. These terms are defined either vaguely or not at all (Kieser, 1997). Micklethwait and Wooldridge (1996, p. 141) point out:

  > In their [the management theorists] bid to predict and control the future they have developed exotic-sounding techniques, such as SBUs, PIMS, PPBs, and 3×3 matrices (to name only the most comprehensible); and they have kept those techniques as mysterious as possible, protected from the prying eyes of laymen by complicated mathematical formulas and labyrinthine diagrams.

  Moreover, management advice is often formulated tautologically – as a platitude (Furusten, 1995). These formulations disguise the fact that fashionable concepts cannot guide managerial actions in a specific situation. If management fashions are associated with mystification, it is not astonishing that the creators of these management techniques are called "gurus", "witch-doctors" or even "charlatans".

- *No accumulation of knowledge.* The passing fashions are not built on one another. Often they even proclaim the total opposite of the previous fashion trend. Critics claim that for every concept which points in one direction, there are two others pointing in the opposite direction. Moreover, as a consequence of the lack of knowledge accumulation, it is argued that the concepts are nothing more than "old wine in new bottles" (Kimberly, 1981; Kieser, 1997). Many critics have noted that the new management techniques only appear to be novel. A good example of one such fad is the recent "empowerment" movement – according to Eccles

and Nohria (1992, p. 4), this fashion is in many ways a contemporary version of the participative management trend of 1950s and 1960s.

- *Fashion techniques do not meet methodological standards.* Frequently-raised objections are: lack of empirical evidence, illegitimate generalizations of successful examples, and deficient possibilities for scrutinizing the methodology or data (Kieser, 1997). Regarding consultants, March (1991, p. 22) states:

  They frequently violate reasonable research standards. They generalize on the basis of elusive observations made on ill-defined samples drawn from unspecified universes. They often seem to ignore – out of ignorance, laziness, or greed – relevant research literature.

  For instance, the best-seller *In Search of Excellence* was much criticized because the group of successful companies was not contrasted with a group of unsuccessful companies – Peters and Waterman (1982) did not investigate whether the "key success factors" were also practised by unsuccessful companies (Carroll, 1983). Partly, management consultancy argues that they would lose their own competitive advantage if they disclosed the data basis. For instance, this is the case with the PIMS Project and the experience-curve: until today the methodology and the database is not completely accessible.

- *Simplification and standardization.* This criticism holds that management fashions tend to place only a few influencing factors in the foreground, which are held responsible for organizational success (March, 1991). Many management fashions can be regarded as success factor approaches and thus, share the well-known weaknesses of this method (Ghemawat, 1991; March and Sutton, 1997). Besides the tendency to simplify, it has been held that the range of instructions of fashionable management concepts is overestimated – regarding the number of companies to which the concepts are applicable and concerning the range of problems which can be solved with the help of the management concepts. "Management by panacea" (Gill and Whittle, 1992) would be an unpleasant consequence. Mintzberg (1990, p. 132) observed, for instance, that the experience curve has produced an "obsession with the scale benefits of experience". The experience curve suggests that with every doubling of production volume the costs drop by between 30 and 90 percent. In 1970s this management technique was used by a large number of companies irrespective of the industry structure, the market position or other situational factors.

The critical objections are supported by a large number of empirical studies, which point to the high rate of failure of fashionable management tools. This is true of Total Quality Management (TQM) (De Cock and Hipkin, 1997), Downsizing (Cascio, 1993), the Portfolio-Analysis (Capon *et al.*, 1987) and many others. Some authors argue that the success of Japanese companies in 1970s and 1980s can even be attributed to their resistance to fashionable management techniques (Pascale, 1990; Hayes and Abernathy, 1980).

Talking about a passing fashion helps to reconcile the discrepancy which gapes between severe criticism on the one hand and broad dissemination on the other. With reference to a passing fashion the rational part of choosing a management technique is pushed into the background and a self-reinforcing effect takes its place. Widespread dissemination increases the chance that the technique is going to be imitated

and adopted by more companies. This again enhances its dissemination and the probability of imitation and so on. Fashion explains why management concepts become popular in a cyclical progression in spite of their serious defects. In this view the management is in fact not in a position to guess the usefulness of a particular technique. Therefore, managers orient themselves towards the preferences of others. In the extreme case the pattern of the "blind leading blind" (O'Neill *et al.*, 1998, p. 101) emerges.

While previously expectations of scientification rested on management fashions, this mind-set changed completely in phase 2. Critics began to see management fashions as a foreign body that was invading the academic system. As a consequence, "immune responses" were triggered: the scientific system discovered that consultancy knowledge was not part of its own. Those who tackled this topic complained that management studies are too open to non-academic contributions (Schendel and Cool, 1988), and that they run the risk of decaying into a melting pot of fashionable buzz-words (DeMeyer and Kim, 1996). In the extreme, consulting concepts were declared as "management folklore" (Armstrong, 1996). The question came up of how it was possible that so many writers had devoted serious attention to the consultants' ideas. The interest in questions like this and the growing number of publications in the field of consulting research (Fincham, 1999) indicate that there is increasing sensitivity for the social context in which management knowledge is produced and utilized.

In the attitude described above managers are frequently seen as the victims of management fashions (Sturdy, 1997). Abrahamson (1996b, p. 130) says:

> [...] managers, like spoiled children, are easily frustrated and bored. Thus, they have an insatiable and fickle appetite for modern, flashy management techniques to play with.

Deficiencies in managerial practice tended to be made responsible for the dissemination of management fashions. Insecure, bored, uninformed, aimless experimenting or simply naive managers seemed to be the reason for the fact that many companies have fallen for rhetorical experienced consultants' tricks. This attitude of academia towards the topic of management fashions described here ideally dominates right up to today. However, there are indications of a repeated change in attitude towards management fashions.

Management fashions as an object of scientific reflection
In the third phase academia regards management fashions as an object of scientific reflection. Drawing on a classical differentiation of the philosophy of science, management fashions belong to the sphere of the explanandum and not to the explanans. Weick's (1987, p. 222) famous anecdote about the lost reconnaissance unit in the Pyrenees, which made it back to the camp with a map of the Alps, illustrates this point suitably. The scientific literature on the criticism of fashion in phase 2 is merely aimed at the map itself and not at its usefulness in the territory. This is also true of the scientific examination of management fashions. How consistent a management concept is according to scientific standards and what kind of effects it produces in the social system of managerial practice are two different things.

To stay in Weick's picture – there has, of late, been an increase in the number of publications which have started to investigate the usefulness of management fashions in the "territory", i.e. managerial practice, instead of their consistency according to

scientific standards. Academic discourse has produced a number of theories which help to understand the phenomenon of management fashions. For instance, Kieser (1997) made use of the garbage-can concept (Cohen *et al.*, 1976) or Abrahamson (1996a) and Røvik (1996) drew on the new institutional paradigm in organization theory (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). These theories meet scientific criteria and offer descriptions of management concepts which strongly contrast with the consultants' own descriptions.

This is a fundamental point which alters the theory-practice-concept of management studies in general. The idea that the better scientific criteria are fulfilled, the more benefit for practitioners cannot be maintained. The quality of management knowledge cannot be determined regardless of social context. In contrast to the assumptions of the correspondence theory of truth, there is no universally valid truth that guarantees the usefulness of a management concept.

The institutional theory serves as an example, through which the dissemination of management fashions is often explained. Consultants sell a particular management fashion, such as benchmarking, as a rational technique. But the scientific observer looks at TQM through the eyes of institutional theory (Walgenbach and Hegele, 2001). In this view the management concept only appears as a "myth of rationality". If one sheds light on the "facade of rationality", it becomes clear that the concepts are not "technically efficient". However, it can also be argued that it is absolutely rational to erect facades of rationality. It might be important to gain social legitimacy or to influence important stakeholders, for example in order to secure external financing. That means, the rationality of a management concept cannot be determined regardless of social context. This also applies to facts supposedly easy to objectify such as IT solutions (Bloomfield and Danieli, 1995). Now the concept of technical efficiency becomes blurred. This path can be even further trodden: from a scientific point of view it can be argued that the demystification of the facade of rationality can endanger the organization's capacity for action. For instance, Hirschman's (1967) Hiding Hand concept of "ignorance of ignorance" points out the need to inhibit reflection, etc. In other words, concepts that are considered to be inefficient can indeed be efficient on a "higher level of rationality" in the social context of application.

Regarding the dissemination of management concepts the perspective in phase 3 contrasts with the better mousetrap theory. If one accepts that the choice of management concepts takes place under uncertainty, imitation and bandwagon-effects play an important role in the diffusion of management innovations (Abrahamson and Rosenkopf, 1993). These processes are typical of fashion cycles. On the other hand, that does not mean that the contents of management fashions are arbitrary. Thus, the "blind leading blind" pattern is exaggerated in just the same way as the better mousetrap theory. The tool needs to be at least viable in order to whip the management fashion cycle into shape. In terms of Weick's (1987) anecdote that means: not just any map – for instance, a map of Disneyland – would have done the trick. The map of the Pyrenees was viable inasmuch as it contained (structural) features (rivers flow downwards, the north side of a mountain differs from the south side, etc.) which are also valid for the Alps. In a similar way a management fashion is viable in the social context of a management practice. For instance, the term "fashion" reflects the contradicting forces between conformity and differentiation in the social context of management practice.

It follows that it is inappropriate to regard managers simply as the passive victims of fashions. Instead, manager have to be regarded as active players in their own social context that differs significantly from the social system of science. Only a few studies have focused on this issue. There are at least some indications that managers are quite disillusioned about the latest management fashion. Watson's (1994) case study shows that managers have developed reflected, at times even cynical, ways of dealing with management fashions – nonetheless, they make use of them.

Table I illustrates the assumptions of the three stages discussed above.

The consulting-science relationship from a self-referential system's perspective

Inconsistencies with the conventional model of an applied science
The development of the relationship between acadamia and consulting in the last decades may be surprising. There is a prevailing view that management studies are an applied science. According to Whitley (1984b, p. 369) in management studies the belief is widespread "that science is essentially a method of producing and validating knowledge which can be applied in a straightforward way". Scientific knowledge is ascribed a universal status of truth that is independent of its social context. It is nearly treated as something material, which can be transferred independently from its social context. This view is supported by the rhetoric of quasi "packaged" concepts.

In the context of the conventional model of an applied science, management studies should also participate in the production of management concepts. Furthermore, scientific concepts for business practitioners should be superior to those produced by consultancies, which do not suffice scientific criteria. In contrast to the three phases described above, an alternative development of the relationship between management studies and consulting should have been expected, e.g.

- Consulting concepts are rejected from the academic discourse, because they do not fulfill scientific standards. Sooner or later the view that management fashions are "non-scientific" would spread into business practice and impede their dissemination.

- Management scientists begin to modify and improve existing concepts. Management consultants begin to integrate more and more scientific criteria in their concepts. These "more rigorous" concepts succeed in business practice. Consulting concepts would lose their faddishness.

	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3
Management fashions as...	Quasi-scientific element	Foreign body	Object of scientific reflection
Academic point of view	Management fashions as contribution to scientification	Immune response	Management fashions as explanandum
Logic of dissemination	"Better Mousetrap"	"Blind Leading Blind"	Fashion cycle
Role of management	Manager as addressee of "Salvation Lessons"	Manager as victim	Manager as player in a social context

Table I.
Change in academic attitude towards management fashions

- Management scientists themselves develop superior alternatives to the consulting concepts. By popularizing their concepts, management scientists might accelerate the dissemination of them.

In other words, it should be expected that the scientific and the consulting discourse converge. But there was no such development. If one sheds further light on this phenomenon it becomes clear that there are fundamental differences between science and practice, which do not coincide with the conventional model of application.

- Shrivastava and Mitroff (1984, p. 18) observe that different "frames of reference" prevail in the two contexts, which means that attention is paid to different problems and that different forms of argumentation are preferred.

- According to Astley and Zammuto (1992, p. 444) the two communities have adopted "semi-autonomous language games". Both contexts engage in specialized forms of discourse, which show specific internal dynamics, history and systems of meaning. Even if both communities make use of the same terminology, the semantics differ in each context.

- Different authors have noticed a trade-off between "rigor and relevance" (Lampel and Shapira, 1995; Shrivastava, 1987). It seems that higher acceptance in the scientific community can only be realised at the expense of practical relevance and vice versa. This effect occurs especially in those fields of management theory which have devoted themselves strongly to the application of knowledge, such as strategic management. This discipline has rapidly gained an academic reputation in the last 20 years, a fact which can be gauged by the exceptionally high acceptance of some journals dedicated to strategic management (Tahai and Meyer, 1999). At the same time, however, complaints can be found about the practical irrelevance of this academic research (Hambrick, 1994; Bettis, 1991).

- March and Sutton (1997, p. 703) observe that the "academic culture" of US-American Business Schools is carefully detached from the "culture of advice-giving". Researchers operating in both cultures would go through a "schizophrenic tour de force", owing to the repulsing forces between the practitioners' and the researchers' environments. Simon (1976, p. 338) takes the same line when he states that the bringing together of both cultures resembles the mixing of oil with water.

- In the face of the considerable gap between both contexts there are doubts as to whether the popular view on applied science is realistic or rather worth striving for. Indeed, the statement that academic knowledge travels rather easily from management studies to consultants, who popularize and implement it, is incorrect (Rogers, 1983; Whitley, 1984a, 1985). The concepts, which are relevant for managerial practice, are usually developed originally by consultants. There are only weak links between the fashionable concepts and academia. Regarding their discipline Rumelt *et al.* (1994, p. 21) recognize:

  > Business school deans like to argue that their research programs, though abstract, constitute the practices of tomorrow. The opposite is closer to the truth. Yesterday's business strategies are the subject of today's research in strategic management [. . .].

  Similar occurrences have been observed in other fields of management studies (Guest, 1990, 1987).

Against the background of these findings it seems rather unlikely that science and consulting will move closer together in the long run. It seems more likely to suggest that both the scientific and the practitioner-oriented discourse develop an own dynamic, with both discourses drifting more and more apart from each other. Luhmann's systems theory offers an explanation for this effect.

Self-reference
The above mentioned observations contradict the traditional model of applied science. From a theoretical perspective, too, the widespread view of the harmonious utilization of knowledge is to be doubted. This occurs most obviously in theoretical perspectives which regard science and management consulting as different social communication systems (Kieser, 2002; Luhmann, 1994). Kieser (2002, p. 207) points out that management studies can be described as a self-referential system:

> It [the self-referential system] establishes which set of statements qualifies as a theory, or which criteria empirical tests of hypotheses have to meet. Scientists not only designate the elements of which science consists, they also produce these elements themselves. That is, the methods with which the scientists achieve results, the hypotheses, theories and data that they deal with, are all fabricated by themselves. Science is autonomous in demarcating its borders.

The self-referential character of science becomes clear if one takes a look at the technique of quotation. Science consists of a network of publications, which refers to itself again and again through quotations. This partial autonomy is – according to Luhmann (1995) – the prerequisite for the functioning and the identity of every social system. It does not follow, however, that science is hermetically sealed off from the social context outside academia. External references are incorporated, but only in accordance with the historically developed, self-referential systems logic of science (Luhmann, 1995; Bailey, 1997).

Self-reference is the reason why management studies and consulting continuously drift apart. This raises the question if it is possible to bridge this self-referential dynamic by creating a shared frame of reference, e.g. the orientation towards organizational performance.

On the suitability of organizational performance as shared frame of reference
Scientists as well as consultants are interested in the performance effects of management concepts. The orientation towards performance could provide a shared frame of reference for both groups, thereby bringing both discourses together again and preventing them from drifting apart.

From a system's theory perspective, however, it becomes clear that the orientation towards organizational performance does not lead to the convergence of the two discourses. The infinite regress mentioned in connection with the third phase cannot be interrupted by establishing a connection between the fashionable management concept and the company's performance enhancement. The effects of management fashions on organizational performance are far from obvious. Management academics intensively discuss which external factors have to be considered, which performance measures are used or whether research with performance as a dependent variable is fruitful at all (March and Sutton, 1997; Mitchell, 1994). The discussion about technical efficiency remains an interwoven part of the social system of science. In the course of the scientific discussion about performance measurement the academic discourse

withdraws again from the assumptions of business practice. Thus, the notion of efficiency cannot claim universal applicability for itself. The self-referential modus of science remains and the different discourses do not converge.

It fits to the system's theory perspective that particularly those elements of management fashions that are considered as "non-scientific" are disseminated in business practice. In order to elaborate the third phase of dealing with management fashions we will discuss those features which make the concepts useful in the social context of business practice although they do not meet scientific standards.

Management fashions in the social context of application
Interpretative viability
A number of authors have shown that management fashions are ambiguous, contradictory and multi-interpretable (Kieser, 1997). Because of "interpretative viability", the actions undertaken under the fashion's label may be decoupled from the original content (Benders and van Bijsterveld, 2000; De Cock and Hipkin, 1997). Sometimes new labels are pushed over the old procedures. "Talk" and "action" (Brunsson and Olsen, 1993) can be separated from each other. At this point it already becomes clear that academic criticism – like the broad criticism in phase 2 – misses the actual managerial practice. Generally, management best-sellers and other publications are criticized; what is not criticized is what companies in fact put into practice under the label of a specific management fashion.

The rhetorical utilization of management concepts is also supported by the fact that they often contain tautological advice. They frequently use formulations such as: one has "to take the appropriate steps", "to plan objectively", "to analyze things systematically" and the like. The tautological construction of such pieces of advice becomes clear if the negation of advice results in a completely senseless alternative (e.g. one has to take inappropriate steps). Under these circumstances, pretended advice only reformulates the question, which the piece of advice was supposed to give an answer. Barabba et al. (2002) recently investigated a number of world-wide management bestsellers and concluded that tautological elements are typical for most of them.

In this respect the differences between scientific logic and practitioner-oriented discourse also become evident. Tautologies are not by far that widespread in scientific journals. For example, they are inconsistent with Popper's well-known falsification criterion. Accordingly, a scientific statement is acceptable only if it is "falsifiable". This means that a priori it must not be impossible that experience can disprove the scientific statement.

Tautological argumentation pattern may indeed reduce the acceptance by the scientific community, but they do not necessarily lessen the dissemination of management fashions in the business community. Tautologies increase the interpretative viability of management concepts and thus their usability as "rhetoric devices". The implications of this aspect have been increasingly noticed in scientific literature in the last few years (Clark and Salaman, 1998; Watson, 1994). Management concepts used as "rhetoric devices" can be useful but not in the way they are officially presented by those who promote them (such as consultants, gurus).

Latent functionality
The official function of management concepts is to provide a guideline for action with the effect of improving organizational performance. In contrast, the latent functions become discernible only in the social context of implementation (Luhmann, 1995). Systematizing the presently available insights from the management fashion literature, some important latent functions of management concepts can be identified. In particular, these are:

(1) the function of legitimation;
(2) the function of uncertainty absorption;
(3) the function of implementation; and
(4) the function of sense-making.

Some of functions are only effective if they remain covert for the organization members, e.g. uncertainty absorption and implementation. This type of function is only effective if organization members do not become aware of them (Luhmann, 1995).

Management concepts fulfill the function of *legitimizing* the organization to external stakeholders. Companies tend to use management techniques rather superficially and put them over the existing structure like a protective cover. External organizational stakeholders, such as banks, suppliers, the media, owners or authorities are vital for every organization (Freeman, 1984). Management fashions can serve as "PR" that help to obtain credits from banks, to shift the bargaining power towards suppliers, to receive a positive media coverage, to accomplish an increase in equity, to demand subsidies, etc.

A central aspect of institutional theory (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Meyer and Rowan, 1977) is the concept of organizational legitimacy. Institutionalized processes, techniques and organizational forms are regarded as "rational", i.e. they are not questioned anymore and have become taken-for-granted. Institutional elements can be regarded as beneficial, even though they are inefficient. In this case neo-institutional theorists use the term "rationalized myth" (Meyer and Rowan, 1977, p. 340). Organizations are forced to adopt these institutionalized techniques: in order to correspond to governmental regulations or to get access to financial resources organizations adapt themselves to the role models prevailing in their institutional environment. In that respect, implementing a management technique as institutionalized element can be regarded as a means to increase their legitimacy. Furthermore, a management concept can itself create the conditions necessary to internally implement the concept. For example, the technique helps to mobilize the capital required to implement the strategy. This view is in accordance with Walgenbach's (1998) findings about the institutional pressure to adopt the TQM fashion. Other empirical studies show similar results: Langley (1988) demonstrated in a case study of three different organizations that, besides its official functions, formal strategic planning has particularly adopted the function of "Public Relations".

A recurring topic in the academic literature on management fashions is the topic of *uncertainty absorption* (Abrahamson, 1996a; Kieser, 1997; Clark and Salaman, 1998). According to this, in turbulent times managers fall back on management fashions in order to orient themselves and to reassure their decisions. Fashionable management concepts help to maintain the illusion of rationality. This is an important element of

many management concepts, which supports their latent functionality. In case the management concept fails its rational form allows managers to externalize the responsibility (Luhmann, 1995, p. 254).

Another latent aspect of management fashions is the *implementation function*. In organizations there is a tendency to attribute failures to external causes (Bowman, 1976; Luhmann, 2000). If the causes of failure are attributed externally, it is not very likely that they will trigger internal action. However, consider the case that a strategic plan rests on a so-called *law* like the experience curve. If the anticipated cost reductions cannot be realized, it is usually not the experience curve that is going to be questioned, reasons are sought as to why it was not possible to exhaust the cost reduction potential which should exist *by law*. The expectations included in the strategic plan are stable, i.e. it is difficult to attribute causes of failure to external factors (Luhmann, 2000). Here, the search for improvement is pushed into the area of implementation. In this way, the management concepts can function as powerful implementation instruments. As Kieser (1997, p. 67) put it:

> One of its main functions is to cut short discussions.

But this is only possible if the rationality of the concepts is taken for granted. On a more general level management fashions provide an ideological framing which every ambitious reform depends on (Brunsson and Olsen, 1993; Kieser, 1997).

Especially because many management fashions are insubstantial on closer inspection, they can also fulfill the function of "sense making". Reorganization projects are usually so complex that it is not possible to find a convincing solution for each and every problem coming up during the transformation process in advance. There is a constant threat for paralysis by analysis. Tautologies can inhibit such a self-blockade by prematurely filling the knowledge gap (Ortmann and Salzman, 2002). Under these circumstances they do not serve as recipe for success but as an intervention strategy of the management. This is not a trivial point: many studies show that methods to stage communication processes are crucial for business practice. Possibly they even make up the essence of management. It is well-known that such processes do not proceed as intentionally and structured as it is often assumed in large parts of the management literature and corporate planning documents. In such cases, management always deals with the dark, with the unknown. The knowledge required for deciding on such projects is produced in a second step, while performing the task. Management concepts support this process by serving as an ideological framing and as a model of change for organization members (Kieser, 1997).

Destruction of latent functions through reflection
Many latent functions depend on the authority of the management concepts. This authority results from the myth of rationality based on the consultant's reputation or on the assumption that the concept has already "proven" its usefulness. Through critical reflection this authority erodes and the hidden functions diminish. It is suggested here that "the fashionization of the topic of management fashions" has favored such reflections. Like the management concepts themselves, the topic of "management fashion" has been promoted by the "management fashion-setting community" (Abrahamson, 1996a), i.e. through the popular business press, gurus, consultancy firms, etc.

The increasing erosion of authority of management concepts is one possible explanation for the shortening cycles of management fashions (Kieser, 1997). This shows that management concepts are not only perceived as a "quasi-technical" tool, but that they are already used as an instrument for intervening in the organisation's social processes. In accordance with the study of Sturdy (1997) many managers are *not* necessarily the passive victims who always fall for new management fashions. Paradoxically, the reflection on the latent functions is the beginning of their abolishment.

Conclusions
The changing relationship between management studies and consulting
In this paper we have addressed the relationship between management studies and consultancy. It was suggested that a change has taken place in the academic attitude towards management concepts. At first the concepts were treated as a quasi-scientific element, thereafter they were regarded as a foreign body and recently, management fashions have been considered as an object of scientific reflection. The change process is still taking place – nevertheless, the diverse publications dealing with the topic of management fashion can be attributed quite well to the single stages.

In the last few years the number of papers which can be attached to the third stage has increased. These contributions consider consulting concepts neither as parts of academia nor as a foreign body in their immune system, but as a social explanandum. We believe that this is a sound development.

Why management fashions should be regarded as an object of scientific reflection
Today there is widespread agreement among researchers that management fashions do not meet scientific criteria. It cannot be expected that this will change in the future – after all, the dissemination of these concepts does not depend on the fulfillment. With reference to Luhmann's concepts of self-referentiality we offered an explanation for this observation. Thus, it seems unlikely that scientific approaches and consulting concepts will converge.

This has important implications for research on management fashions: not only should researchers discuss fashionable management bestsellers, but they should also focus on how managers deal in fact with these concepts in practice. For example, it cannot be assumed that a company that legitimizes its reorganization with a lean management label really refers to the ideas presented in Woman *et al.*'s book or other lean management authors. At present time there is almost no empirical research on this topic. However, this seems necessary if we want to increase the understanding of the latent functions of management fashions.

Consequences for the self-conception of management
On a more general level, the thoughts presented in this paper have also consequences for the self-conception of management. Although a network of academic publications can be identified quite clearly in the field of management studies, its limits are uncertain. Whitley (1984b) describes the "fragmented state" of management studies and the difficulties in defining which type of communication and/or publication belongs to the discipline and which does not. Knowing what belongs and what does not belong to oneself has to do with knowledge about the own identity. Management

studies suffer from the lack of their own identity and papers from stage 3 can be regarded as contributions towards overcoming this lack.

If this is accepted, some widespread assumptions about applied science are questioned. Viewing management studies as a self-referential social system implies accepting a theoretical language (Astley and Zammuto, 1992; Luhmann, 1994). We doubt whether it is still appropriate to address both academics and practitioners at the same time in academic core journals. This view is not very popular and stands in the way of what is usually promised in the editorials of scientific management journals (Schendel *et al.*, 1980). Many appeals were made to management academics, which point in the opposite direction. The appeals aimed to iron out the differences between academia and practice. For example, the demand was made to avoid technical language, to address the practitioner's problems directly, to take more practitioners on board, etc. (Bettis, 1991). One could also say the claims were aimed at becoming more similar to management consulting. Considering what scholars of management studies know about the consulting business and its fashionable concepts, this mission would surely be a paradox. Thus, it is probably not a coincidence that all the appeals pointing in this direction – although made vehemently and for a long period of time – have remained unsuccessful. At least in academic core journals scientists write for other scientists and the persons involved are aware of this (Gopinath and Hoffman, 1995).

Indeed, it can be argued that the scientific view must be incongruent to the perspective of managerial practice (Kieser, 2002). The scientific description of management fashions is not like the descriptions which consultants offer or which prevail in organizations. As Weick (1996, p. 310) put it.

> Researchers often adopt a theoretical lay language that stays close to practice and simply recapitulates what organizations feel they already know and say. […] When two groups are found to be doing the same thing, one is probably dispensable.

The contribution of consulting literature

"Advisor literature", such as the publications of management consultants in practitioner-oriented journals, is not unnecessary from the beginning but should be viewed as an object of scientific examination rather than as a part of it. The examination of the latent functions of these concepts shows that their benefit cannot simply be determined on how rigorous these recommendations are according to strict academic criteria. In spite of their methodological weaknesses such concepts can be a powerful tool for intervening in the social processes of an organization.

Even if academia is not able to provide "more truthful" descriptions of the world, it does at least offer more complex descriptions than other systems. The growing stream of management literature dealing with the latent functions of management fashions – directly or indirectly – offers such complex descriptions, which go far beyond simple "fashion-bashing" (Carson *et al.*, 2000, p. 1143).

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