Interview

Perspectives on Management Consulting Research

Timothy Clark, Robin Fincham, and Andrew Sturdy as interviewed by Michael Mohe

1 Introduction

In recent years management consulting has attracted more and more scholarly and university attention. In Germany, the first chairs for consulting have been established, universities have developed their own consulting courses, some special conferences on management consulting have been conducted, and journals have been published on special issues. Hence, one can conclude that research on management consulting has significantly increased in the last years (Mohe 2004; Nissen 2007). However, in comparison to the English language discourse on consulting research, the German discourse seems to be at an early stage. Additionally, it seems that the German scientific discourse on management consulting is somewhat separated from international research. To give an example: Within the German literature we can find new approaches to consulting that build their particular approach on the insights of the systems theory as developed by Luhmann (1994; 1995; Mohe/Seidl 2007). However, this systemic approach to consulting seems to exist exclusively within the German speaking consulting market. As Armbrüster and Kieser (2001, 690) conclude in their literature review: "In the English speaking region neither systemic consulting nor literature about it exists." In contrast, in the English speaking discourse a new research direction called *critical consulting* (Clark/Fincham 2002) has been established, which is only gradually recognized by the German scientific discourse. In another case, the English language literature attends to subjects that are rather under-researched in the German discourse, for example boundary complexity in management consultancy (e.g. Sturdy et al. 2006a), rhetoric, legitimacy, or power within the client-consultant relationship (e.g. Clark 1995; Fincham 1999; Fincham 2002a; b; Sturdy 1997a; Sturdy 1997b; Sturdy et al. 2006a; 2006b).

Some German researchers on management consulting are striving to participate more in the English language discourse, which can be seen in the attempts to build the first bridges from the German to the English speaking scientific community. Nevertheless, the domain of research on management consulting is still predominantly domiciled to the Anglo-Saxon realm. In particular, this research on management consulting is intrinsically tied to names like Timothy Clark[1], Robin Fincham[2], and Andrew

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1 *Timothy Clark* is Professor of Organizational Behaviour at Durham Business School, Durham University, UK. Since completing his PhD on the executive recruitment industry he has had a long-standing interest in the work of various knowledge entrepreneurs. Most recently his research has been concerned to understand the nature of interaction between consultants and clients, and management gurus and their audiences. He is the author/editor of nine books including *Critical Consulting* (with Robin Fincham) and *Management Speak* (with David Greatbatch). He is presently working on two books *Management Consultancy in Action* (with Clark, Fincham and Handley) and *Demistyfying Business Celebrity* (with Eric Guthey and Brad Jackson). He has been a General Editor of *Journal of Management Studies* since 2001 and is currently Vice Chair of the British Academy of Management.

2 *Robin Fincham* is Professor of Organizational Behaviour at Stirling University, Scotland. He has researched previously in areas of information technology and organizations, and intellectual capital. He is presently interested in management fashion, management consulting, knowledge management, and professionalism, knowledge workers and the business services industry. His publications include *Principles of Organizational Behaviour* (2005, Oxford), *Critical Consulting* (2002, Blackwell), *New Relationships in the Organized Professions* (Avebury, 1996) and *Expertise and Innovation* (1994, Oxford).

Sturdy[3], who are all recognized for their work on management consulting and have individually as well as jointly made exceptional contributions to consulting research. Therefore, this chapter tries to build a bridge between the English speaking to the German speaking discourse on management consulting by asking these authors directly about their work, their conceptions about consulting research, and their evaluation on certain aspects and developments in management consulting. The interview was conducted via e-mail at the beginning of 2007. The interviewees were given information regarding who else was participating in the study, but asked to separately and individually answer the pre-defined questions in writing. The three single interviews were reviewed separately by the interviewer and then returned to each interviewee (e.g. to point something out more clearly, to clarify certain arguments, or add references). The three interviews were then compiled into one document and sent to every participant to allow for cross-communication. In this stage of the interview process the interviewees could read the answers of the other two and decide whether to make final corrections to their own statements.

The interview consists of six parts: In the first part the interviewees were asked about their fascination for consulting research and for their individual scientific grounding. In the second part they state their appraisals about the status quo of consulting research and their interpretation of *Critical Consulting*. The third section attends to the relationship between consulting research and consulting practice. The consultant-client relationship is the subject of the fourth part. The fifth section addresses the role of consultants in society. Finally, the conclusion asks for current and future trends in consulting practice and research.

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3   *Andrew Sturdy* is Professor of Organisational Behaviour, Warwick Business School, University of Warwick, UK. He has a longstanding interest in the transfer and translation of management ideas especially in relation to the roles of management consultants and management education and with respect to organisational change. In particular, he has carried out research projects on IT strategy consultancy, back-stage client-consultant interactions and, most recently, led an innovative 'fly-on-the-wall' study of knowledge flow in consultancy project relationships. He is currently writing a book (with Clark, Fincham and Handley) on this work – *Management Consultancy in Action* – and advises the UK government and National Audit Office on public sector use of consultancy

2   Introductory Questions

MM: You started to do research on management consulting early on. What was your motivation to focus on this special subject? Where did you get your fascination about consulting research?

TC: My PhD was an economic analysis of the headhunting (executive search and selection) industry. I completed this in 1989 and then worked as a management consultant for 18 months. I worked for a small firm that specialised in conducting evaluations of NGO projects and market research studies. I moved back in academia in 1991 (The Open University) and started to publish from my PhD. I met Graham Salaman at The Open University and found that we had a common interest in management consultancy work. We collaborated and this set me on a path that has been developing ever since.

RF: I started in 1996. I had been doing research in IT and new technology for a long time and wanted to move to something more central to management – I had a feeling things were going on I didn't know about. Then oddly I had an undergraduate student who did his final year dissertation on business process reengineering (BPR) – which I had never heard of – and he was doing it from the novel angle of looking at consultants' use of reengineering. So simultaneously I got into management fashion and management consulting. I *am* fascinated by consultants, but I think it is important to get interested in particular occupations and their ways of life (like IT people, which I continue to be interested in). Consultants are a fascinating group from many angles – their curious symbiotic relationship with management, their ambiguous 'professional' status and so on.

AS: In a project on change in financial services companies in the late 1980s, I came across management consultants frequently and realised that this was an important and under-researched area. I was then also fortunate to have the opportunity to direct a research project on this topic.

MM: What is your own scientific 'grounding'? Do you prefer certain theoretical or empirical approaches to analyze the field of management consulting?

TC: I have degrees in sociology and economics and so have always been interested in the fusion of ideas from different disciplines and perspectives. My focus throughout has been on understanding interaction between client and consultants whether using sociological approaches (i.e., the dramaturgical metaphor) or ideas in relation to management knowledge. I would not like to be thought of as

coming from a particular theoretical school since I prefer to draw on a wide range of theoretical ideas in order to investigate particular issues. As these change so do my theoretical frameworks. I am currently examining the micro knowledge employed to sustain rapport within the client-consultant relationship. This is leading me to combine conversation analytic techniques with ideas from Ryle, Schön, Bourdieu as well as Orlikowski, Carlile and so forth.

RF: I am an ex-Marxist basically, so veer towards critical realism – although it is a common sense version of this rather than the highly theoretically constricted version which I think is an unreal take on 'realism'. I also have a strong orientation towards *both* theory and empirics. Either theory or empiricism seem to me relatively easy to do; the trick is to analyse data in a theoretically loaded and critical fashion. And contain all that within an 8,000 word article! I also have a strong orientation to qualitative research. I tend to think of this as really the only kind of social science research, and so-called quantitative research as not quantitative at all (in the strict natural science sense).

AS: My first degree was in chemistry and management, but my preferred approach is broadly sociological and within what has come to be known as critical management studies. Here, I seek to focus on the relationship between power and identity and to challenge taken for granted assumptions. My preference is for qualitative methods, but sometime combined with more quantitative approaches.

3 The Status Quo of Consulting Research

MM: You stated that there is a vast amount of "largely sterile, atheoretical and overly prescriptive literature on management consulting" (Sturdy et al. 2004, 337). How would you characterize the current status quo of research on management consulting? And what were for you the most important milestones or findings in the history of consulting research?

RF: Up until say 10 years ago there was only a literature which we would characterise as coming from within the industry itself, and which was hardly critical at all. This was written largely by consultants, or academics who acted as consultants, and focused on things like process consulting. The aim was to make consulting 'better' or enable the client to use consultants better. Since then we have seen probably two main kinds of 'critical' literature: what I call a journalistic kind, that basically collects consultant horror stories, and an academic kind that is likewise sceptical of consulting but is more interested in the occupational discourse. As

to milestones or findings, I am not sure that literature that espouses to improving understanding really has hard findings. But certainly we now know more about how consultants legitimize their knowledge, which is probably the core problem of the critical approach.

TC: Current work is very much focused on the nature of knowledge within consulting from a range of perspectives. The most influential works in my view are *Process Consultation* by Schein and *The Reflective Practitioner* by Schön. There was also the Addison-Wesley series of books on Organization Development in the 1960s by Beckhard etc. that were highly influential. More recently, research on consulting has been reinvigorated by the notion of management fashion from Eric Abrahamson. Chris McKenna's new book titled *The World's Newest Profession* is the first detailed history of the consulting industry and is very readable.

AS: There is still a very strong divide in the literature between prescriptive and more analytical work – between theories in, and about, consulting if you like. While the former rarely does more than justify a particular practical approach or consulting in general, the latter rarely recognises the empirical insights of the former. The most impressive work in my view can be found by Edgar Schein and Fiona Czerniawska in the former camp and Peter Wood, Christopher Wright and Jim Kitay and Matthias Kipping in the latter.

MM: Could consulting research be viewed as an own, self-contained scientific discipline? Has research on management consulting already become institutionalized or is it just a passing fancy of the scientific community?

AS: No, it is an occupation or management activity. Many writers seek to present their work as if consultancy is a discipline and in doing so fail to say anything about organisations, change or the socio-political context of consultancy.

TC: Research on consultancy has to be able to contribute to broader debates about management if it is to grow and prosper. If it remains a self-contained scientific discipline it will atrophy.

RF: Perhaps here one needs to understand what consultancy is. It isn't an occupation – consultants are not equivalent to accountants or architects. Consulting is a vast grouping of expert labour, some of it technical, some professional, and some quasi-professional. I see consultants as 'parallel managers' – consulting is a kind of version of management that exists in the marketplace (while 'management' is within the organization). So on this count consulting research does have a special

status within the broad spectrum of management research, and the current fascination with it is unlikely to go away.

MM: You have contributed a great deal to the development of Critical Consulting (2002) as a new perspective for consulting research. However, you have also stated that "the critical camp is not without tensions of its own" (Fincham and Clark 2002, 9). Could you explain to us what Critical Consulting means for each of you?

AS: Critique in terms of power relations in society; scepticism; challenging taken for granted assumptions. Not simply repeating popular media critiques even if some of them have some validity. Indeed, the very profile of popular critiques should be an object of critique itself.

RF: Obviously there are spectra of 'criticality' and some people are critical but maybe not as critical as others. I think what we were referring to here was the more 'journalistic' literature (there is a steady trickle of these popular books) that focuses on consulting horror stories. In a sense this seems diametrically opposed to the positivist literature (the consultant as expert adviser, as reflective practitioner etc.) but really it starts from the same epistemological basis, namely that we should be studying consulting to discover how it can help companies. I think both these approaches (journalistic and positive) can be grouped together and contrasted with what I would call critical academic research. Within the latter another distinction is over what Contu and Willmott (2003) call 'performativity' – i.e. general regard for effectiveness at work and innovation in expert labour. There are very influential writers who one might call 'critical' and who are heavily into the complexities and politics of knowledge, but who still believe in the expert performance of work. Some might say this approach is not strictly 'critical' since at the end of the day the powers of capital benefit from excellent performance.

TC: To me *critical consulting* is not being critical of consulting as an activity in the manner that so many journalists are. Rather, Robin and I were looking to question the commonly accepted notion at that time that clients automatically accepted the value of consulting as an activity. Furthermore, given the nature of services (intangibility) and economic factors (information asymmetries), clients could not easily identify the value of what they were purchasing since it was not delivered until purchased. We therefore argued that there was a need to focus on those processes by which clients came to accept the need for and value of

consultants. This led to a focus on the rhetorical practices employed by consultants, the dramaturgical metaphor and so forth.

4 Consulting Research and Consulting Practice

MM: In Critical Consulting Alfred Kieser (2002, 212) wrote: "Consultants do not apply theories in order to provide this service. They would be ill-advised if they did so [...]". Do you agree with this statement? Do consultants need a theory at all? If so, what kind of theory?

RF: Not quite sure what Alfred meant by this – maybe that academic theory would be of no practical use. I tend to be suspicious of the often-heard view that somehow 'academia' remains influential in areas like new management theory and knowledge. The reality it seems to me is that the big consulting companies are independent in generating their own theory, and far 'beyond' academia. I suppose one could qualify this simple (and pessimistic) view – the likes of Harvard, MIT and Michael Porter still feed influential ideas to practitioners.

TC: I know what Alfred is getting at here. I would argue, going back to Argyris and Ryle, that consultants employ theories in their practice. Their practice is infused with theories in use. Consultants need theories on which to base their management of the client-consultant relationship. Indeed, everyday practice is underpinned by common sense theories of action. Consultants are not immune from these.

AS: They have more or less implicit theories such as those of change, intervention, relationships, politics and behaviour.

MM: Timothy, you have stated that "academics also need to intervene more speedily in the knowledge management market" and that "scholars must become more intimately involved with the rhetorics that underpin successful communication with practitioners" (Clark 2004, 372). What are your strategies for success in the knowledge market? Do we need more 'consulting professors'?

TC: I think we need write for different audiences and so communicate our results more broadly. We have to demonstrate our value beyond the academic community. More consulting professors would mean that we have to learn and employ a range of skills that enable us to more effectively overcome what Andrew Pettigrew (1997) has termed the "double hurdles" of management research – rigour and relevance.

MM: Alfred Kieser, well-known for his critical views on consultants, has experienced that consultancies in Germany are unlikely to face up to the criticism

directed at them and that they avoid almost any dialogue with him (Kieser 2001; Dilk/Littger 2006). What are your experiences in co-operating with practitioners? Are consultancies in the UK generally open minded to you and your research?

RF: I find this view fascinating, because in the UK we believe that we have an almost uniquely anti-intellectual culture – but in other countries (Europe and the US) we think that things are much better. So it is odd hearing Alfred say this. So maybe our own position is not that different and other academics are not listened to as much as we thought. Anyway, my experience of consulting is that they are probably more open to academic ideas and research than industry in general. I think it is just the nature of consulting and consultants. They are always on the look out for ideas, they are in the business of applying things that at least look like theories and models, and also I think many consultants keep half an eye on other career openings and they think academia might be a possibility. Of all the research respondents I have ever met, consultants are most like academics. Incidentally, Alfred also quotes "business professors" as being influential agents of fashion.

TC: Getting access to consultancies is very difficult. I sit on the jury for the Management Consultancy Association Awards (have done so since 2002) and also contribute to debates within the Institute of Management Consultants. Individual firms are less keen to be involved.

AS: They are open minded in some cases except insofar as ideas undermine their interests or raison d'être, but some areas overlap. In general, consultants are much like academics in feeling that they cannot really learn from anyone else, but are happy to appropriate a model or two if it suits their purposes!

MM: Which forms of co-operation between client firms, consultancies and academia are desirable and viable?

AS: Data gathering is one….

TC: Clients: Sponsoring research into the selection and management of the client-consultant relationship. Consultants: Teaching on MBAs and sponsoring student projects and research. Academics: Teaching on induction courses for consultants, delivering workshops and assisting with though leadership processes.

RF: To be honest I am not really in the camp that looks for ways of 'improving' the client-consultant relationship, or the effectiveness of consulting interventions. I suppose my view would be that thoughtful practitioners can get something out of

contact with academia, though they probably have to meet us half way. It seems to me too that, in reality, what groups like management and consultants 'get out of us' is the almost-physical contact with university life – being included in debates, invited along to conferences – rather than some inherent transfer of magical knowledge or insight. What we have to offer is a kind of egalitarian dialogue that industry doesn't possess, but which they may find refreshing.

5 The Consultant-Client Relationship

MM: You have written much about the consultant-client relationship (e.g. Clark 1995; Fincham 1999; Fincham 2002a; Sturdy 1997a; Sturdy 1997b; Sturdy et al. 2006a; 2006b). Has this relationship changed over the years? If so, how has it changed and what brought it about?

AS: Not vastly; perhaps some increase in client sophistication and professionalism; increased emphasis on seeking 'partnerships' from consultants; increased complexity in projects and parties involved (e.g. multi-consulting firms), but all this depends on the sector and region in question.

TC: The client has become more empowered with the consequence that consultancy and relationship are more fragile.

RF: Quite early on I settled on the notion that the consultant-client relationship was at the heart of things – partly just by observing how obsessed consultants are with their clients. So I see this axis as central to understanding consulting as an activity, I see consultancy as 'relational' activity and so on. When you say has this relationship changed, do you mean has it changed, or has the way we see it changed? I'll assume the former. Having said that I'm still not sure I can give you an answer. In a sense, if this is a fundamental managerial relationship, then one might expect constant terms of trade. I am not sure, for instance, that clients are increasingly sophisticated in their dealings with consultants, even though more and more managers must be dealing with them.

MM: In a recent paper, you stated that the traditional conceptions about boundaries in the consultant-client relationship that see the consultant as an 'outsider' and the client as an 'insider' are not able to capture the 'real' complexity of consulting projects (Sturdy et al. 2006a). Additionally, we have accounts of consulting being conceptualized as "liminal spaces" (Czarniawska/ Mazza 2003; Sturdy et al. 2006b). What are your views on this?

AS: … that the relationship and status can vary widely according to context, but that the outsider

view of consultancy dominates and this overestimates the knowledge difference and challenge consultants bring and underestimates the political and knowledge closeness that sometimes occurs. At the same time, consultants have an interest in presenting themselves as either outsiders or insiders according to the context.

RF: I think we were trying to challenge the simple view of the outsider bringing their expertise in (though I am not sure I know of any critical literature that has posed the situation so simplistically). So we noticed examples of consultants who had a longer term association with particular forms than the management (who had a higher rate of turnover). Outsiders that were insiders. As to the idea of liminal space, yes I agree. But I am not sure what further you can say once this point has been noted. I think perhaps the main point is that the literature is starting to notice that its image of how consulting is conducted is slightly unreal – a single consultant employed to work on a project for a single client. Perhaps this is the result of the emphasis on the 'consultant-client relationship' that I have certainly contributed to. The reality is that there are complex client and consultant teams (Kieser has written on this), project work is the basic form of organization, and consultant interventions often have a complex narrative to how they got started. However, a problem with the liminal space approach is that it may imply a too-consensual view and also lose the relational aspect of consulting work. Perhaps we need a tension between space and relationship.

*MM: It is currently observed that particularly large companies are striving towards a more 'professional' conduct with consultancy, e.g. via the implementation of **special purchasing procedures or strategies,** building up consulting infobases for tidying up a company's internal landscape, and employing measures to control and evaluate the consultants (Bäcklund and Werr 2005; Mohe 2003; Mohe 2005; Mohe et al. 2006; Werr/Pemer 2005). How would you advise consultancies to react to these developments on the clients' side?*

AS: To be more open about their interests above and beyond addressing client needs.

TC: Consultants need to operate more effectively as a collective. At present competition within the industry means that they do not work together to manage the increasing power of the client and client groups (e.g. central government) nor poor media impressions.

RF: In a sense, consultancies should only be worried if we assume a relationship of conflict and tension with the client. If clients are becoming more informed about consultancies this should only worry consultancies (and potentially damage their business) if previously they have been constructing their appeal on the basis of 'rhetoric and persuasion'. If this is true they may not want to be 'found out'. However, if we assume a rational basis for the client-consultant relationship, then they have nothing to fear! That's the glib answer. But I can see that consultancies might (quite rationally) fear that clients might get hold of the wrong information, and in general no-one wants surveillance on them to be carried out – the fear is that even relatively 'accurate' information still does not fully do one justice. The consultancies would like to put their own case rather than have clients employ them on the basis of their own information. Perhaps the answer is to encourage consultancies to be even more forceful in how they market their services. Perhaps they will need to put even more resources into this.

MM: We have learned much from your writings about management fashions and impression management (e.g. Clark 1995; Clark 2001; Clark 2004; Clark/ Salaman 1998a; Clark/Salaman 1998b; Fincham/ Evans 1999; Fincham 2002b; Sturdy 2004). Regarding clients' 'professionalization' and the increasing criticism on consultants: Have management fashions and impression management gone out of date for consultants? Or have just the patterns of creating management fashions and impression management changed in the last years?

AS: No, still essential, but an iterative process (à la Sturdy 1997).

TC: So long as intangibility and information asymmetries persist then impression management will be vital. As for fashions, the content changes but the dynamic seems to be quickening in that fashions are popular for short periods. Consequently, consultants need to replenish their knowledge and shift their service to every changing *Zeitgeist* more frequently.

RF: Notably Alfred Kieser links the areas of management fashion and management consulting. But the models he develops, while I think they are very thorough and compelling, don't quite do it for me. First the bundle of 'fashions' that consultant firms trade in tends to differ from the usual bundle of fashions that academics identify – like TQM or BPR or knowledge management. This is because consultants are interested in proprietary systems that can differentiate them from competitors (albeit that if a particular fashion becomes extremely popular they have to offer it). So the simple idea of con-

sultants using rhetoric or impression management to hype and promote certain fashion doesn't quite square with what consultants do on the ground. Consultants play off different discourses; they will trade in fashionable ideas at the same time as claiming that they are really about lasting methods and skills; they will pose as the masters of new concepts and also claim that they don't use jargon or blind the client with science.

6 Consultants and Society

MM: On the website Top-Consultants.com James (2006) states that "Germany [...] is rapidly becoming one of the most consultant-unfriendly countries in the world." For example, police protection was necessary to safeguard the celebration of the 40-year company anniversary of McKinsey Germany against resentful demonstrators (Jahr-Weidauer 2004). Recently, a protest group calling itself "The Needless" (Die Überflüssigen) handed out a less-than-flattering certificate to Roland Berger: "Exploiter of the Year 2006". What picture is drawn in the UK about consultants? How are consultants viewed and perceived in the UK? Are consultancies going through a 'legitimation crisis'?

TC: Yes, consultants are, and have been for some time, going through a legitimation crisis (see Chris McKenna's book). It seems to me that this has been endemic to consultant condition. No one seems to like consultants outside of their clients. The media in the UK is full of "horror" stories. Every pound sterling spent on consultants is seen as a pound not spent on patient services, the army or social services. They seem to take the view that consulting is a zero sum game in which the public always loses.

AS: Yes and no – it depends who you ask. Critiques come from the right wing (press) in relation to government spending, partly as a way of criticising the public sector, but also consultants as being over-priced. They also come from the left in terms of the nature of the product and accountability. However, these critiques often scapegoat consultants in that they underplay how they are the agents of their clients as well as pursuing their own interests.

RF: I guess the action you refer to came from a number of German 'traditions' but probably one of them would have been this aspect of the country's industrial culture that managers have to manage something, and would be highly suspicious of so-called outside experts. In Britain the managerial culture is rather different and aligns more with the US and would be more conducive the notion of 'general management' and hence something like consulting. Here I think consultants are perceived in a mixed way – some positive some negative – and that the crisis of legitimacy is probably an ongoing thing rather than anything that is ever particularly acute.

*MM: In Germany some **researchers see tendencies that the society has itself developed towards a** "consulting society" (Faust 2006). As Kurbjuweit writes: "Nobody presses the idea of efficiency so forcefully in our society as McKinsey" (Kurbjuweit 2003, 18). **Do we have to worry that society is being over-influenced by consultancies and itself acts more and more in response to the maxims of the consultancies?***

AS: Yes, but they are a consequence as well as a condition of managerialism … A more serious concern is the hidden, back-stage, influence of consultants in elite circles.

RF: I don't quite see things in these terms as if there are certain trends we could modify in order to make the world a better place. I don't necessarily see the power lying with consulting, or buy the idea that managers are duped and persuaded by consultants. The sort of fears you raise are fed by these assumptions from the critical consulting literature (as well as the basic notion of the size and spread of consultancy). In contrast, ultimate power still lies with corporate capital (where else could it lie?). Consultants are people too!

TC: This whole thesis goes to the notion that society is being run by faceless advisers of various kinds (many of whom are employed politicians). Consultants are one such group and not necessary the most powerful. However, they are powerful and do exert considerable influence over our everyday lives without us appreciating this. Many government policies in the UK are drawn-up in conjunction with studies by consultants. Outsourcing of key services means that they are run by consultancies and so forth. Whether this power is insidious is not clear but nevertheless needs to be met by greater transparency in their use to avoid such claims.

7 Current and Future Trends in Consulting Practice and Research

MM: In the last years many large German companies have built up in-house consultancies. We currently can observe a contradictory development: For example, companies like DaimlerChrysler, Deutsche Bank or Deutsche Telekom have all closed their internal consulting units (Mohe 2007). What are your perceptions about the development of in-house consultancies in the UK?

AS: No obvious trend is evident, but this is a planned topic of mine for future research and I would welcome discussions on this topic (e.g. why externals are used when appropriately skilled internals are present). The further development of internals in public sectors might be more likely. Their role is likely to be limited in that much of what consultants bring is the political power of external legitimacy.

RF: My broad approach would be to see internal vs. external consulting as one of those management dilemmas (like make vs. buy, or centralization vs. decentralization) where there is no 'answer' just a set of pros and cons, and decision makers have to decide what's best in current circumstances. Looked at in this way, you would expect trends to surge back and forth, because mere change can improve things from a management point of view by upsetting comfortable relationships and keeping people on their toes. If large German companies are getting out of in-house consulting it may be because of a perception that something much better is available in the marketplace, or that they aren't happy with consulting in general. It's an interesting point, isn't it: The pros and cons of what internal and regular consulting are perceived by the client to offer, and how this changes.

MM: What are in your opinion the current trends in consulting practice? Do you see new forms of consulting or a new generation of consultancies and consultants?

AS: No, but this is not my particular area of expertise. There is evidence of an increasing legitimacy of smaller niche consulting firms in certain contexts.

TC: A greater focus on client needs. The use of teams of consultants from different consultancies as clients put project teams together rather than consultancies.

RF: We have done four major case studies not long ago, and while not a 'sample' this does give some sort of an overview.

– In the past three or four years the 'dance' between the big elements of the business services industry has seen the IT giants partner up with the consultancies and separate from the accounting groups. It would be interesting to look at how consultants work with the IT firms that now own them.

– There is no evidence that demand for strategy advice is declining or is less prestigious, or that the top strategy firms are in decline.

– The public sector continues to be very attractive for consultants, especially the big powerful ones, and there remains a huge amount of work there and operations for them to upgrade.

– A lot of effort has been expended to enable public bodies to manage their relationships with consultants better (given the perception of slick experts conning the less worldly civil servants, together with the need for value for taxpayers' money). But I doubt this can ever be done by formal means of contract management rather than just experience.

– In the IT area it seems clear that many areas of innovation have now moved beyond in-house developers which will benefit specialist consultancies and software houses (though this trend has probably long been established).

MM: What are in your opinion the next challenges for consulting research? Could you give us an outlook on your future projects?

RF: I don't have any master plan for my next research project, other than to mine the data we have for contributions to the general field of critical consulting. It might be that placing 'consulting' in the broader context of business services might be an interesting thing to look at; the level of how the new ownership patterns are working may also be interesting – both these are 'higher level' interests over and above the exploration of the client-consultant relationship, which may have been done to death. Also more studies inside consulting firms might be useful; the bulk of research (ours included) has been on consulting activity. It would be fascinating to look at these firms at the top level – again the focus has been on shop-floor consulting so far. All these areas are more difficult to study of course.

TC: My future work will focus on the interactional practices of management gurus and leaders. In particular, I am interested in how the actors powerfully communicate ideas and visions in ways that persuade, motivate, inspire and generate trust amongst increasingly educated and intrinsically motivated workforces. My work therefore seeks to draw upon sociological work on speaker-audience interaction and research on leadership. It links to consultancy in terms of understanding how one very specific group of consultants work and how managers are themselves influenced to pursue certain ideas over others. My recent book with David Greatbatch called *Management Speak* (2005) provides the basis for this work. In addition, Robin and I plan to examine charisma within consulting. There is a link with the previous work in that it focuses on charismatic speakers.

AS: Breaking away from the view that consulting research is of academic interest in itself; being

more explicitly theoretical and empirically, exploring back-stage or hidden aspects of consultancy and the role of consultants in society i.e. beyond organisational politics.

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Correspondence addresses:

Timothy Clark, Professor of Organizational Behaviour at Durham Business School, Durham University, UK. E-Mail: timothy.clark@durham.ac.uk

Robin Fincham, Professor of Organizational Behaviour at Stirling University, Scotland. E-Mail: robin.fincham@stir.ac.uk

Andrew Sturdy, Professor of Organisational Behaviour, Warwick Business School, University of Warwick, UK. E-Mail: andrew.sturdy@wbs.ac.uk

Michael Mohe, Jun.-Professor of Business Consulting and head of the research group Consulting Research (CORE) at University of Oldenburg, Germany. E-Mail: michael.mohe@consulting-research.de