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Coevolution in Management Fashions

The Case of Self-Managing Teams in The Netherlands

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In their theory-development case study on management fashions, Abrahamson and Fairchild (1999) proposed that "[t]he lifecycle of discourse promoting a fashionable management technique co-evolves with the lifecycle of this technique's diffusion across organizations" (p. 731). Because this generalization is based on the case of a single management fashion in one national setting, management fashion literature should benefit from additional data supporting or contradicting this claim. The authors reassess coevolution by comparing the life cycle of Dutch discourse on self-managing teams (SMTs) with data on their prevalence. They show that Dutch discourse on SMTs was temporarily intensive, while in praxis they see signs of a stabilization in the number of organizations that use SMTs. Unlike past conceptualizations, they assert that organization concepts that are the subject of a temporary popular discourse are thus not necessarily transient in praxis.

Keywords: management fashion; organization concepts; self-managing teams; The Netherlands

One of the most influential and most-cited articles on the subject of "management fashions" is Abrahamson and Fairchild's (1999) "theory-development case study" (p. 710) of the fashion of quality circles in the

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United States. Building on earlier work by Abrahamson (1991, 1996), they suggested that fashions are characterized by a rise and fall in the number of publications on the subject, and that this "lifecycle of discourse promoting a fashionable management technique co-evolves with the lifecycle of this technique's diffusion across organizations" (Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999, p. 731). Abrahamson and Fairchild (1999) implied that, for any and all management fashions, trends in discourse and trends in praxis are closely related. Because their generalization is based on a study of a single management fashion in one national setting, the management fashion literature should benefit from additional data supporting or contradicting their claim.

This article aims to test empirically, and so reassess, the "coevolution" proposition. To this end, we study and compare the recent popularity of self-managing teams (SMTs) in the Netherlands in discourse and praxis. Based on the results, we take an inductive approach and theorize on the impact of media on the beliefs and behavior of "fashion consumers," thereby enriching our understanding of the processes by which fashionable concepts diffuse. Finding counterevidence for coevolution means that reliance on discursive trends as indicators of trends in praxis may give a misleading picture of the spread and implementation of management fashions.

In the next section we discuss current theory on management fashions. Based on this literature we derive a number of hypotheses concerning the management fashion of SMTs in the Netherlands. We then discuss the methods of our research. To enhance reliability, we use multiple sources for describing teams' popularity in discourse and prevalence in praxis. Furthermore, we pay ample attention to the diverging methods used in the (secondary) sources of our data on the prevalence of SMTs. We do this specifically because gathering data on the prevalence of specific management techniques, be they fashionable or not, is fraught with difficulties. We argue that the results of such research are strongly influenced by choices made by researchers. We report the results concerning this case, discuss implications for management fashion theory and management practice, and identify some potentially fruitful areas for further research.

Literature Overview

Management Fashions

A distinction can be made between *organization concepts* and *management fashions*. Whereas an organization concept may be loosely defined as a prescriptive, more-or-less coherent view on management known under a

particular label (cf. Benders & Verlaar, 2003, p. 758), not all organization concepts succeed in becoming fashionable. When they do become fashionable, this entails temporarily intensive discourse and increased applications in praxis. Examples of fashionable organization concepts include business process reengineering (BPR), lean production (LP), or total quality management (TQM).

According to Benders and Van Veen (2001), the study of management fashions should involve studying the patterns of "the production and consumption of temporarily intensive management discourse, and the organizational changes induced by and associated with this discourse" (p. 40). The producers of discourse constitute the supply-side (Abrahamson, 1996) of organization concepts. Often, these are management-knowledge entrepreneurs such as consultants, management journalists, and gurus; however, organization concepts are also supplied by academics. As entrepreneurs, their motives are commercial, which has implications for the way they present their ideas to managers. The argumentative composition used in fashionsetting texts usually aims to persuade potential fashion followers (Kieser, 1997; Røvik, 1998). This type of discourse displays rhetorical strategies, promises enhanced organizational performance in the face of ever-increasing competitive pressures, and is presented in a persuasive mixture of ambiguity and simplicity (Kieser, 1997). Benders and Van Veen (2001) stressed that a prerequisite for an organization concept to become fashionable is a relatively large degree of "interpretative viability" (Ortmann, 1995, p. 371). This leads to conceptual variations as "(potential) users can eclectically select those elements that appeal to them, or that they interpret as the fashion's core idea, or that they opportunistically select as suitable for their purposes" (Benders & Van Veen, pp. 37-38). A concept's label and its content can become loosely coupled as the concept finds divergent interpretations or "translations" (Czarniawska & Sevón, 1996; Røvik, 1998) to specific organizational contexts on the demand side of the market for organization concepts. A good example is BPR. In Hammer and Champy's (1993) *Reengineering The Corporation*, the book that "launched" the fashion, the concept of *BPR* was ill defined (Kieser, 1997), but managed to stir up considerable enthusiasm. It then acquired contrasting meanings during its popularity and subsequent demise, such as downsizing versus automation versus process-based organizing (Heusinkveld & Benders, 2001).

Management fashions are typically presented as having a predetermined "life cycle." Gill and Whittle (1993) described the evolution of management fashions with a number of discrete phases. In the birth phase, the concept is launched by a prospective "fashion setter," with the concept aimed at

reducing specific performance gaps. If the concept is picked up, consultants and other management-knowledge entrepreneurs will try to promote and develop it in the hope of gaining orders: the adolescence phase. The maturity phase has been reached at the height of the fashion's popularity, characterized by routinization and bureaucratization of its application by consultants. This is followed by a decline phase.

Measuring Life Cycles

The distinction between discourse on popular organization concepts on the one hand, and the associated organizational changes on the other hand, has consequences for the application of Gill and Whittle's (1993) "life cycle" model to empirical phenomena.

Researchers on management fashion often use "print-media indicators" (PMI) to assess the swings in popularity of a concept in discourse (Benders, Nijholt, & Heusinkveld, in press). PMI is a form of citation analysis that uses keyword searches through bibliographic databases to yield the number of publications through the years. This type of research builds on the premise that the amount of discourse on an organization concept in the course of time reflects the interest in this concept. Researchers on management fashions commonly use an operationalization of discourse in terms of published articles, whereby the amounts of books, conferences, and workshops are not counted. Access to sales or attendance figures, respectively, is indeed more difficult to acquire. The resulting graph usually resembles a bell-shaped curve, which supposedly reflects the life cycle of the fashion under investigation.

Several authors have noted a gap between the definition of management fashions as an empirical phenomenon on the one hand, and the focus on print media indicators as a research method on the other hand (e.g. Clark, 2004; Fincham & Roslender, 2004; Swan, 2004). It is argued that a measure of a concept's life cycle in praxis should be obtained by studying evidence of organizational implementation. A good measure is thus data on the prevalence of an organization concept within a certain population. Prevalence data is the result of cross-sectional research and measures how many organizations or establishments apply the concept. If longitudinal or trend data on prevalence is available, this may show a rise and fall in the popularity of concepts with user organizations through time, suggesting the existence of the life cycle of a concept.

The most important question that therefore arises, one with conceptual and methodological implications, is the exact relationship between the two

different types of life cycles. Clark (2004) suggested that "there is a tendency in the literature to assume that there is a symbiotic relationship between the pattern in the volume of discourse and trends in the adoption and rejection of ideas by organizations" (p. 299). This is based on the observation that the use of PMIs in studying diffusion of fashionable concepts is "universal" (e.g. Abrahamson, 1996, p. 258; Barley & Kunda, 1992, p. 378; Barley, Meyer, & Gash, 1988, p. 33; Benders & Van Veen, 2001, p. 41; Braam, Heusinkveld, Aubel, & Benders, 2001, p. 499; Carson, Lanier, Carson, & Guidry, 2000, p. 1152; Grint, 1997, p. 33; Heusinkveld & Benders, 2001, p. 243; Karsten & Van Veen, 1998, pp. 5-6; Kieser, 1997, p. 51; Pascale, 1990, p. 20; Ponzi, 2002, p. 261; Shenhav, 1995, p. 575; Spell, 2001, pp. 365-367; Westrup, 2003, p. 407). In contrast, empirical evidence concerning diffusion is "rarely provide[d]" (Clark, 2004, p. 299).

The preference for analyzing discourse over praxis is understandable if the relationship between discourse and praxis is indeed symbiotic. In that case researchers may assume that the results of PMIs provide a reliable estimate of a given concept's progression through its life cycle in praxis. Furthermore, measuring the prevalence of organization concepts in praxis is difficult and costly (Benders, Huijgen, & Pekruhl, 2002) compared to the ease of conducting research in widely accessible bibliographic databases. We know of only one article that (a) presents data on popularity in discourse and prevalence in praxis of a fashionable organization concept and (b) proposes an explanation of the relationship between discourse and praxis based on the evidence presented. This is Abrahamson and Fairchild's (1999) "theory-development case study" on quality circles (QCs), which they claim is "perhaps the first carefully documented study of why and when a single management fashion occurred and why it took the shape it did" (p. 710).

Like Gill and Whittle (1993), Abrahamson and Fairchild (1999) argued that management fashions are characterized by a short-lived popularity with an "upswing" characterized by enthusiasm and high expectations, followed by a "downswing" as a result of the fact that "the quick-fix techniques that become fashionable may be incapable of narrowing the performance gaps they claim to address, and disappointment invariably sets in" (p. 715). They explained how, in the upswing of the management fashion of QCs in the United States, positive feedback loops are at work between discourse on and adoption of organization concepts. The media function as a channel for positive discourse on the concept provided by management-knowledge entrepreneurs. Thereby, the media provide anecdotal and survey evidence of prestigious and less prestigious organizations adopting the concept. This causes a bandwagon effect pressuring others to adopt as well, adoptions that may, in

turn, be reported in the media to the extent that they are considered newsworthy. The authors presented secondary data to show an increasing number of adopters of QCs indeed existed in this period.

Abrahamson and Fairchild (1999) found evidence that "superstitious learning," as opposed to real learning, characterizes discourse in the upswing (p. 714). It is through this learning that discourse enables the dissemination of the belief that specific management techniques are rational and progressive. When performance gaps opened up by environmental changes generate considerable anxieties and demand for management fashions claiming to close these gaps, "management fashion setters" react on this demand by creating discourse that specifies "simple, all-powerful, and quasi-magical techniques." Superstitious learning thus leads to "emotional outbursts of unrealistic enthusiasm in the upswing" (p. 715).

Conversely, during the downswing phase of the wave Abrahamson and Fairchild (1999) suggested that the absolute volume of discourse lessens and is characterized by a more negative and critical attitude debunking the management fashion. This will coincide with "diffusion of decisions to reject [management fashions]" (p. 731). Where the upswing of the fashion gave rise to superstitious learning, this part of the life cycle, then, induces "real" learning as enthusiasm is "followed by disillusionment in the downswing" (p. 715). Real learning thus disseminates the belief that a management technique is no longer progressive and rational. They support their claims with evidence that discourse on QCs became increasingly negative and more scarce during the downswing and use a second, different, secondary source to present evidence suggesting a simultaneous downswing in the prevalence of QCs. Abrahamson and Fairchild thus characterized the relationship between discourse and praxis as showing "coevolution" and define the management fashion-setting process as "the process by which management-knowledge entrepreneurs continuously redefine both their and fashion followers collective beliefs about which management techniques are at the forefront of rational management progress" (p. 711).

A problematic issue arises if we assume that coevolution between discourse and praxis exists for any and all cases of management fashions. Clark (2004) suggested editors of journals and business magazines, attempting to outperform competing outlets, continuously try to be first in identifying new, progressive, and groundbreaking ideas. This automatically leads to constant transience, a rejection of the old and a renewal of subjects in the business press (Heusinkveld, 2004). This entails that for a given concept to be at the center of media attention is by necessity a temporary phenomenon. From that it follows that, if coevolution were to exist, no once-fashionable concept can

ever be sustained in praxis. In contrast, alternative theories suggest that management practices, when adopted, may entrench in organizations (Zeitz, Mittal, & McAulay, 1999) and become highly resistant to change (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). The associated practices may become institutions on the level of organizational fields or the population of organizations. It remains an empirical question whether these latter theories possess more predictive power as to what happens to adopted and once-fashionable concepts. If so, coevolution with temporary discourse on these concepts does not occur.

Because Abrahamson and Fairchild's (1999) generalization is based on a study of a single management fashion in one national setting, we extend the empirical base by presenting additional data supporting or contradicting their claims. In the next section, we present the case of SMTs in the Netherlands as suitable for exploring this problem. If no coevolution is found, this will form counterevidence to Abrahamson and Fairchild's proposition. Our central research question is therefore: does the popularity of SMTs in the Netherlands show evidence of coevolution between discourse and praxis? To answer this question we hypothesize, in line with Abrahamson and Fairchild:

Hypothesis 1: There has been a rise and fall in the amount of published articles on self-managing teams in the Netherlands.
Hypothesis 2: There has been a rise and fall in the prevalence of self-managing teams in the Netherlands.

Methods and Sources

Even though Buchanan (2000, p. 25) spoke of "an eager and enduring embrace" of teamwork, he also noted there appear to be waves of interest in the concept. Specifically in the 1990s, teams have become increasingly popular, to the extent that they have been labeled "hypes" (Koppens, 2003, p. 7), or "management fashions" (Hamde, 2002, p. 416; Gibson, Tesone & Blackwell, 2003, p. 15). As teams appear to qualify as a management fashion, this makes them a suitable case for testing our hypotheses. In the next section, we discuss the limits and possibilities of the two databases we use to paint a picture of discourse on teams. After that, we discuss some issues in research on the prevalence of specific organization concepts. The fact that various Dutch research institutes have monitored the prevalence of teams over the period of interest, allowing us to compare PMI with diffusion data, makes the case of SMTs in the Netherlands well suited to our purpose.

PMI

To reduce the dependency on the specific composition of a single bibliographical database (Benders et al., in press), we used two databases to research PMI. The most recent search entry date was in January 2004. OnLine Contents (OLC) claims to contain the tables of content of some 15,000 journals and magazines on all subject areas, covering an estimate of 13,000,000 articles in varying languages dating back to roughly 1770. Further research shows that OLC contains an average of $1,365 \times 10^3$ references to Dutch articles during the years 1990 to 2003 ($SD = 659 \times 10^3$), with a range of 82×10^3 references (in 1990) to $1,935 \times 10^3$ articles (in 2003). This range suggests the coverage of the database drops as we go further back into the past, so in addition we measured the contents of OLC during the years 1955 to 1990 with 5-year intervals, as in the early 1950s the first articles on sociotechnical systems design were published (Trist & Bamforth, 1951). The additional measurements result in a markedly lower average of 11,990 Dutch references per year ($SD = 28,417$) with a range of 346 (in 1970) to 81,846 (in 1990). Any lack of references to articles on teamwork from the years preceding 1990 may therefore be the result of the lack in content of the database.

The second database used is ManagementCD, which was updated and published 3 times a year until October 1997, then containing a total of 17,664 references to articles and publications in the area of management and human resource management (HRM). The database contains references as far back as 1983 with an average of 1,177 references a year ($SD = 330$), with a range of 220 (in 1983) to 1,694 (in 1995). It was originally compiled by librarians of large Dutch companies. ManagementCD contains substantially fewer records than OLC but is more specialized and has less variation over time in the number of records. Both databases contain a mix of academic and professional journals, and OLC also contains references to a number of general-interest magazines. However, the exact ratios between these different types of journals and magazines are unknown.

The most recent search entry date was in January 2004. We searched in titles, abstracts (though not all articles in both databases are abstracted), and keywords to obtain relevant articles on SMTs. Neither database contains full texts, so attempts were made to obtain hard copies of all retrieved references. As search terms were used *hele taakgroepen* and *zelfsturende teams*, two Dutch synonyms for SMTs, and other adjective-noun combinations of the above, in singular and plural. These terms were considered most appropriate after an initial literature review, which suggested that the most important theoretical background for the Dutch team concept is a specific Dutch version of

sociotechnical systems design, dubbed "modern sociotechnology" (MST). The aim of MST is to go from "complex organizations with simple jobs to simple organizations with complex jobs" (De Sitter, Den Hertog, & Dankbaar, 1997, p. 497). The realization of this involves grouping and coupling interdependent operations into organizational units, and subsequently assigning these units the maximum feasible degree of decision-making authority. These work groups are not temporary or project based and have fixed team members. If team leaders are present, they should take the role of facilitator or coach (Van Amelsvoort & Scholtes, 1997).

Although SMTs are sociotechnically well defined, we expected interpretative viability to lead to varying interpretations of these teams in discourse. Especially articles dealing with practical application of such teams were expected to have diverging descriptions. We wished to capture as many of these interpretations as possible and include these in our databases of articles. Nonetheless, it was deemed necessary to establish a cut-off point after which articles could not be considered relevant. For instance, in psychological literature on group dynamics, the label *taakgroepen* was sometimes used to denote temporary (as opposed to permanent) task forces, which is contrary to the definition of SMTs (Van Amelsvoort & Scholtes, 1997, p. 11). Therefore, to make accurate judgments about the relevance of articles, one of the authors performed close reading of all obtained texts. Assessments were based on these grounds: SMTs should be described as a permanent group of employees with a certain, if small, degree of autonomy. In addition, articles where SMTs were merely mentioned in the context of another discussion were not counted. Thus at least one paragraph or section had to be devoted to the subject of teams. Furthermore, there is no reason to assume that Dutch managers' preferred method of acquiring knowledge about managerial issues is by reading English-language or other international professional magazines. Therefore, hits in languages other than Dutch were excluded.

Prevalence in Praxis

First, we note that prevalence is, in itself, not a measure of the diffusion of a concept. This is simultaneously a strength and a weakness of the method. When using a method that charts the number of adopters in a given period (i.e. "incidence" data) it remains unclear what the net effect this has on the population; it remains possible that an equal or larger number of organizations chooses to reject the concept resulting in a net decline in prevalence. The same holds, *mutatis mutandis*, for studying rejecters. Longitudinal or

trend data on prevalence allows for the comparison between several points in time and shows the net growth or decline in the number of organizations that apply a concept. However, information about the gross number of adopters or rejecters then becomes lost in the aggregation.

The notable lack of studies providing data on the prevalence of fashionable organization concepts may be attributed to the difficulties in gathering such data. Apart from the fact that large-scale surveys are costly, a second complicating factor is that, as ideational innovations (Rogers, 1995), the decision to adopt concepts does not invariably lead to concrete manifestations. Their prevalence in practice may therefore also be difficult to measure, especially as interpretative viability allows for variations in interpretation of the fashion, on the part of the researcher who aims to observe an organization concept in praxis, and the practitioner who must actively interpret and contextualize a more-or-less abstract organization concept (Benders & Van Veen, 2001). This has three important implications: first of all, because of the scarcity of such data, we use all available sources to indicate the prevalence of teams over the period of interest. Thus, we use three sources allowing us to triangulate the results. Thereby we aim to present trend data and, through cautious interpretation and comparison, paint an overall picture. Second, as across-the-board consensus between researchers on how to measure the prevalence of SMTs is not to be expected, there are definite limits to the comparability of different results (for an equivalent problem in the case of high performance work organizations, see Osterman, 2000, pp. 180-181). Last, as we expect the choices made by researchers to have a high impact on the reported prevalence, the latter may be as much an artifact of the research design as the empirical phenomenon of SMTs in itself. This means that, for our case of SMTs in the Netherlands, we must provide an extensive discussion of the research designs of our data sources to indicate their comparability. Before we discuss the different sources, we provide a short discussion of the general choices researchers make when constructing a measurement scale that allows empirical observation of SMTs in organizations.

First, it must be taken into account what the intended population and units of observation are: establishments or organizations; the latter can exist of multiple establishments. Furthermore, for any organization concept usage of the label within an organization may be loosely coupled to application of its content: that is, there is a difference between rhetoric and substantive adoption (Benders & Van Bijsterveld, 2000). A direct result is that surveys simply asking whether organizations "have self-managing teams" may allow respondents to give socially desirable answers, in effect resulting in a measurement

of the popularity of the concept's label rather than the extent to which it is put in practice.

In terms of constructing a valid scale, it should be noted that organization concepts sometimes possess what has been called "step-down capability" (Miller, Hartwick, & Le Breton-Miller, 2004, p. 11). This refers to the possibility to implement to a greater or lesser extent. Consequently, viewing "adoption" as a dichotomous variable results in an oversimplification of organizational reality and loss of information. Existing work groups or teams may have a variable degree of autonomy: that is, on how many and what aspects of work do they have the right to self-manage? The classification of such teams as "self-managing" depends on the number of such aspects identified by the researcher and restrictions as to how many of these should be self-managed. In addition, there may be variability in the percentage of the workforce, usually understood as nonmanagerial, core, or frontline employees within an organization (Osterman, 2000, p. 180), that actually works in teams. This variability can be captured in the notion of the degree of "coverage" or "penetration" (Benders et al., 2002; Osterman, 2000). The observation of an "organization with self-managing teams," then, also depends on the required level of penetration identified by the researcher.

Our first source is a project called Employee Participation in Organizational Change (EPOC), commissioned by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions. In the context of this project the prevalence of teamwork was investigated among European establishments with more than 20 employees (Benders et al., 2002). Data gathering took place during 1996, involving surveys on the delegation of responsibilities toward groups of employees in 10 countries. For the Netherlands, 505 useable surveys were returned, representing a response rate of 21.9%. Respondents were general managers or the managers considering themselves most appropriate to respond. A central construct was that of the largest occupational group (LOG), that is, the largest number of nonmanagerial employees at the workplace. The following question (#24d in the survey) illustrates the operationalization of SMTs:

> Has the management given to formally introduced GROUPS the right to make DECISIONS on how their work is performed on a GROUP basis without reference to an immediate manager for one or more of the following? Allocation of work; Scheduling of work; Quality of work; Time keeping; Attendance and absence control; Job rotation; Coordination of work with other internal groups; Improving work processes. (Benders et al., 2002, p. 373)

To qualify as "team-based," establishments had to meet the following restrictions: at least four (of the eight mentioned) decision rights had to be assigned to groups, and at least 70% of employees in the LOG work in such groups. Applying these restrictions served to exclude establishments that were applying teamwork merely on a small or pilot basis, and excluding those that had teams in place without proper degrees of autonomy. This highlights the importance of autonomy in this research, indicating that the construct of *teams* is underpinned by the sociotechnical approach.

A second source is the TNO Employers' Survey, carried out in 1998 (Dhondt, Wiezer, Kraan, & Goudswaard, 2000; $N = 2212$) and 2002 (Kraan, Dhondt, Van Sloten, & Van de Bovenkamp, 2003; $N = 1020$) resulting in trend data on the prevalence of teams among Dutch organizations with more than 20 employees, excluding not-for-profit establishments. The concept of LOG was not used in the operationalization of teams, and the number of possible decision rights has been adjusted. The authors consider the following decision rights as the most important: allocation of work, scheduling of work, quality of work, and improving work processes. Based on the EPOC results, the authors expected a strong correlation between the occurrence of the first two decision rights and the last two, leading them to discard the latter from the research design for economic reasons.

Our third and final source consists of trend data derived from Organization for Strategic Labor Market Research (OSA). Borghans and Ter Weel (2003) used OSA data, collected every 2 years from 1988 onwards, in a study on trends in usage of information and communications technology. Although OSA uses a panel of organizations, which would ideally mean that longitudinal data can be obtained, the turnover in the panel is so great during the 1994 to 1998 period reported by Borghans and Ter Weel that we consider the results as trend data, with a range in N of 2.537 to 2.725. Because the focus of the survey is on technology rather than work forms, measuring prevalence of SMTs is done with a single question. Question #21b from the survey is: "Does your organization have self-managing teams (*autonome taakgroepen*) in which team members can, to a great extent, organize and distribute work autonomously? (*i.e., regelcapaciteit*)?" Contacting OSA directly, we were also able to obtain the results for 2000, 2002, and 2004, although data on panel size and turnover was, at that time, not yet available. Arguably, OSA yields data on the rhetorical adoption of SMTs, as opposed to TNO and EPOC, which focus on substantive characteristics of teams (Benders & Van Bijsterveld, 2000).

Figure 1
Print Media Indicator of Self-Managing Teams: Combination
OnLine Contents and ManagementCD
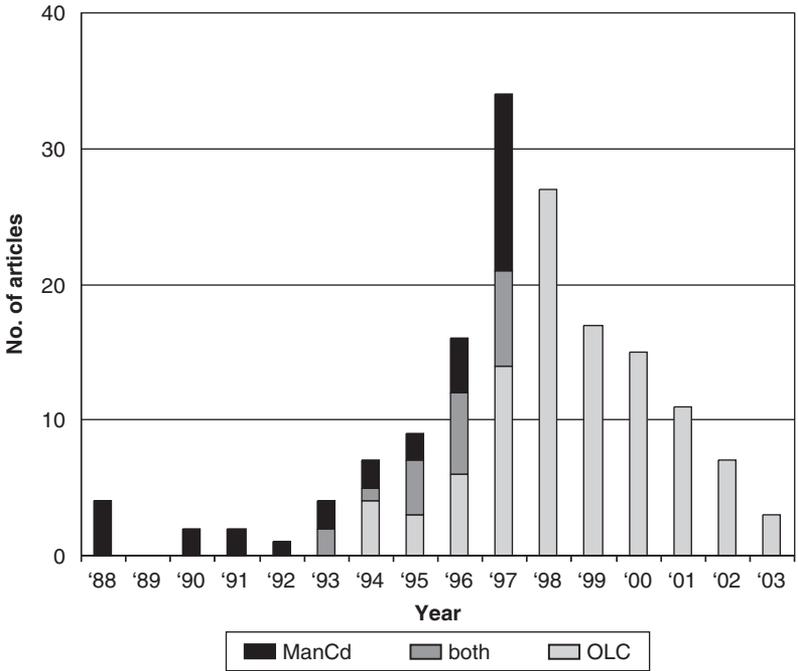
Results

Print Media Indicator

Figure 1 indicates the popularity of SMTs in Dutch discourse. The results from the two databases have been added together, with doublets removed. Hypothesis 1 is confirmed, as the surge in publications considered typical for management fashions is clearly visible here. A low number of publications in the initial period of 1988-1992 is followed by a sharp rise as of 1993, peaking in 1997 and 1998. Anecdotal evidence in the form of conference announcements corroborates a peak of interest in teams around that time:

Commercial seminar bureaus organized many conferences and workshops on SMTs in 1998 and 1999 but have virtually stopped their activities since. Decline sets in as of 1998 and continues in the subsequent years. All in all, 159 articles were found. Of these, only nine articles were published in academic magazines (six in *Bedrijfskunde* and three in *Tijdschrift voor Arbeidsvraagstukken*). No articles translated to Dutch were found.

Compared to other management fashions in Dutch discourse, the debate on SMTs seems to be of average intensity. Discourse on the Balanced Score Card consisted of 95 articles (Braam et al., 2001), whereas BPR featured 233 Dutch articles with 50 translated articles originally produced outside the Netherlands (Heusinkveld & Benders, 2001). The databases appear to be complementary in the sense that OLC yields no hits predating 1993. As the coverage of OLC drops for older years, any references to articles predating 1993 were all extracted from ManagementCD. Given the relatively small size of the Dutch-language region and the width of OLC's coverage, at least for the more recent years, we expect that the aggregated results from the two databases reflect almost the entire population of Dutch articles on SMTs, with perhaps a marginal number of references not found.
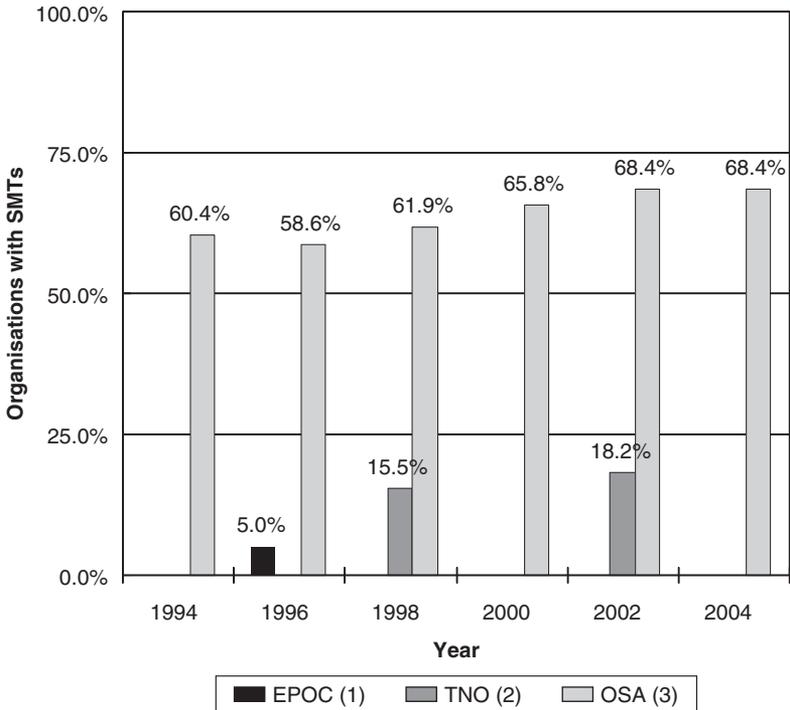
Prevalence in Praxis

Figure 2 shows available data on the prevalence of SMTs. Den Hertog (1990, p. 126) noted that in 1989 hardly any participating organizations could be found for a government-sponsored study into the effects of teamwork. By 1994, however, OSA reported that an impressive 60.4% of organizations have SMTs. The credibility of the OSA data are severely compromised when we compare its 1996 result (58.6%) with the EPOC result from the same year (5.0%).

Considering that EPOC has the best face validity, with far more stringent conditions and little room for interpretation on the part of the respondent, we must conclude that the OSA data are not valid for making inferences about the cumulative number of establishments that have adopted teams in a substantive way. Rather, they simply show how many organizations signal they have adopted SMTs rhetorically. We do see great stability in the OSA percentages over the years, if not a small growth between 1996 and 2002. Remarkably, given OSA's constantly shifting panel membership, the reported percentages for 2002 and 2004 are exactly the same. Because the measurement instrument has not been changed over the years, these data do seem to be reliable.

Bearing in mind that the TNO questionnaire was based on EPOC, the rise from 5.0% (EPOC) in 1996 to 15.5% (TNO) in 1998 may be indicative

Figure 2
Self-Managing Teams in the Netherlands 1994-2002

Note: (1) Benders et al., 2002; (2) Kraan et al., 2003; (3) Borghans & Ter Weel, 2003 and *OSA Vraagpanel* 2000, 2002 & 2004.

of an actual rise in prevalence of establishments applying teams. However, TNO did not impose restrictions on coverage and uses fewer decisions rights. Considering the differences in measuring instruments, we thus interpret such a result cautiously. More reliably, the TNO trend data point in the direction of a small growth from 15.5% in 1998 to 18.2% in 2002, suggesting a relatively large number of new adopters in this time period.

The aggregate picture may point at continued growth in the number of organization applying SMTs; however, a more prudent interpretation is that there are, at least, no signs of a massive shift away from teams since 1998.

Whereas the life cycle of discourse on SMTs had its zenith in 1998, followed by a downswing, in praxis we see a stabilization in the number of organizations that use SMTs, in a more substantive and rhetorical sense. Considering the (anecdotal) evidence that teams were a marginal phenomenon as recently as 1989 (Den Hertog, 1990, p. 132), the life cycle of teams has seen an upswing; however, no clear signs of a downswing. Hypothesis 2 is therefore not confirmed.

Discussion

With regards to our central research question, we aimed to see whether Abrahamson and Fairchild's (1999) coevolution proposition holds by comparing the life cycles of discourse and praxis of SMTs. It appears that there is, as yet, no clear downswing in the application of teams in praxis, even though there has been the expected downswing in discourse about SMTs. The question has been brought up to what extent this can be attributed to a lag effect in the learning effects of discourse on practitioners. If such a lag effect occurs, discourse may still be related to a downswing in the number of applications of teams; however, this effect is not yet visible in the results. However, it should be noted that Abrahamson and Fairchild did not describe any such effects occurring in their description of the management fashion of QCs. In fact, they stated: "the upswing in the amount of discourse about quality circles *paralleled* [italics added] the diffusion of decisions to adopt them, whereas the downswing in the amount of discourse *coincided* [italics added] with the diffusion of decisions to reject them" (p. 731). For these developments to be simultaneous is necessary because, in their explanation of these patterns, Abrahamson and Fairchild argued these are instances of "reciprocal causation" (p. 731). Even if a lag effect exists in our case of SMTs, which we with our aggregate data cannot disprove, this causation is not reciprocal and would still provide counterevidence for coevolution as conceptualized by Abrahamson and Fairchild. Furthermore, if a lag effect exists in the relationship between discourse and praxis, this lag would have to be inexplicably large: The downswing in discourse sets in as of 1997 while the OSA results show high stability up until 2004.

Therefore, we conclude that the life cycle of discourse promoting the fashionable management technique of SMTs only partially coevolves with the life cycle of this technique's diffusion across organizations. We continue with discussing the implications of this for Abrahamson and Fairchild's (1999) model of the fashion setting process.

Conceptualization

Our case study of SMTs in the Netherlands shows organization concepts that are subject of a temporary popular discourse are not necessarily transient, which is contrary to the colloquial uses of the words *fashion* and *fad*. Hereafter, we develop a conceptualization that might explain our result, departing from a problematic issue in Abrahamson and Fairchild's (1999) description of the management fashion setting process. Namely, they assume that consumers of fashions are influenced by discourse in a very direct way, through initially "superstitious" and, subsequently, "real" learning, after which the actions of practitioners undertaken under the label of the currently fashionable concept are fed back into discourse. The existence of this "feedback loop" is also implied in their definition of management fashions as "collective beliefs" about what management techniques are "rational and progressive" (p. 710). We now discuss what limits the learning effects that shape these collective beliefs, after which we argue that differences between organization concepts and the national contexts in which they are applied influence the (perceived) success of these concepts.

Despite a long tradition of research, strong and direct effects of media exposure have rarely been found (Dearing & Rogers, 1996). However, we do not propose to ignore the role of the media in the diffusion of organization concepts simply because we question the possibility of diffusing "ready-made" beliefs. Rogers (1995, p. 195), in *Diffusion of Innovations*, stated that mass media are, in the first place, important for creating awareness that an innovation exists. Awareness, however, is a necessary stage in the adoption process before persuasion and subsequent adoption, but not identical to either. In contrast, interpersonal channels within networks and contact with "change agents" are relatively more important for the persuasion to adopt an innovation (Rogers, pp. 195-198).

Similarly, agenda-setting research, which started partly as a reaction to the lack of results in conventional studies into media effects, posits that the media have the capacity to push issues up the agenda of policy makers and the public: "[the press] may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think *about*" (Cohen, 1963, p. 13). In the case of management fashions it makes sense to view groups of organizational decision makers and boundary spanners as "policy makers" and "the public," respectively, with an *agenda* defined as "a set of issues that are communicated in a hierarchy of importance at a point in time" (Dearing & Rogers, 1996, p. 2). It may make sense to speak of an "organizational agenda" when trying to understand the adoption

process in a specific organization. Newell, Swan, and Robertson (1998) thus spoke of an "agenda-formation" episode in the organizational innovation process. Alternatively, such an agenda could be held at the level of the management community, consisting of practitioners, scholars, consultants, and other "management intellectuals" (Guillén, 1994). This would fit a description of management fashions with partial coevolution between discourse and praxis. Then, media output in the form of article counts must strictly be seen as indicative of wider discussions about a currently fashionable concept. Coevolution might exist between discourse on the concept and its being "on the agenda." As a number of organizations enact the concept on this agenda, this creates the impression that print media output itself has exerted a direct influence. However, when the agenda changes, there is no reason to assume this leads to managerial decisions to abandon concepts that have already been applied in organizations. We believe such a pattern may hold for other cases of management fashions as well. For instance, Heusinkveld (2004) has argued that the notion of BPR remains sedimented in organizations that have applied this methodology and continues to influence current decisions on organizational restructuring even as its label is no longer used in organizational discourse (p. 88).

As the media have more of an "agenda-setting" or "awareness-creating" role in the management fashion-setting process, it becomes clear that, if management fashion theory is to concern itself with explaining how fashionable concepts diffuse into organizations, it should look more closely at specific change agents within and around organizations. Following innovation diffusion theory (Rogers, 1995) these should be considered key actors in the diffusion of management fashions. Change agents could be consultants or other "knowledge merchants" (Newell et al., 1998, p. 301) but also champions of the innovation from within the organization. Reasoning in such ways, also taking account of the roles of individual actors in and around organizations in the stages of awareness and persuasion, highlights the contextuality of the adoption of fashionable organization concepts at the microlevel of analysis. Nonetheless, the possibility of collective beliefs as a result of aggregate adoption processes is held open, as is the possibility of coevolution between discourse and praxis as a result of a large number of failed adoptions, resulting in a lower prevalence of applications. However, in such a description of the evolution of management fashions, coevolution is but a possibility.

This leaves us with a question that explores the limits of the fashion metaphor: If even fashions can not be counted on to be transient, should we still label these phenomena fashions? We follow Swan (2004) in proposing the fashion label still has its uses. Apart from drawing attention to the vested

commercial interests of parties on the supply side of fashions, which may partly explain that, perhaps more so than with other social sciences, the administrative sciences are often accused of being cyclical and noncumulative (Abrahamson, 1996), it highlights "socio-political, normative, and discursive, rather than efficiency-driven, influences on the diffusion process" (Swan, p. 312). However, having established that fashions may have a lasting impact on praxis, the question comes up in what circumstances this may occur. To establish such a discussion we look at differences between the two cases at hand: QCs in the United States and SMTs in the Netherlands.

Comparing Fashionable Concepts

We described the management fashion-setting process as an aggregate number of adoption processes at the microlevel of analysis. Such a fairly open-ended description does not take into account the (perceived) success of these concepts when they have been adopted, nor does it specify what types of organization concepts may be successful under what types of conditions. Cole (1985) discussed the importance of "macro-politics" at the national level in explaining why "movements to popularize . . . new work structures have been sustained in some countries and not in others and why when they spread, they are maintained to the degree they are" (p. 561). He performed a comparative analysis of international differences in the adoption and institutionalization of small-group activities. Comparing QCs with small-group activities in Sweden and Japan, where these have become institutionalized, it becomes clear that macropolitical aspects have a great impact on the potential for management fashions to be retained. Cole argued (1985, p. 579) that the institutionalization of QCs did not take place as: management perceived few incentives, the necessary mobilization of resources for diffusion was not centralized (i.e., an "infrastructure" was lacking), government was noncommitted, and unions were often hostile. The differences with SMTs in the Netherlands are numerous. The EPOC study revealed that management perceived teams as being beneficial to organizational performance, as 74% of organizations reported expected productivity increases as a reason for adoption of teamwork (Benders, Huijgen, Pekruhl, & O'Kelly, 1999, p. 39). Especially conducive to management motivation is the fact that during the latter half of the 1990s the Netherlands experienced a particularly tight labor market, making organization concepts promising increased quality of work especially salient. Furthermore, the Netherlands can be characterized as having a strong consensual tradition, thereby favoring participative work forms. This explains

the position of Dutch unions with regards to teamwork, which can be described as being positive though not uncritical (Van Klaveren & Tom, 1995). Combined, these circumstances result in a macropolitical environment conducive to the adoption and institutionalization of SMTs.

Differences also exist between the organization concepts themselves. Whereas QCs have been considered a Japanese concept with an uneasy fit in American individualistic culture (Strang & Kim, 2004), the development of SMTs, within the context of modern sociotechnology, took place within national academic circles from the 1960s onwards. Although De Sitter et al. (1997, most notably) tried to test out their design methodology in companies and were successful in conducting quite a few change projects, the academic environment in which they were working allowed them to develop their methodology over a longer period of time, irrespective of commercial success. In addition, by publishing and other dissemination efforts they could pave the way for their approach and teamworking as a part of it. As stated, few organizations appear to have been actively involved in the late 1980s (Den Hertog, 1990, p. 132) yet that did not hamper the development of the sociotechnical approach. With the Eindhoven University of Technology as the main academic stronghold—an environment appreciating close involvement with user organizations—an infrastructure to promote sociotechnical ideas could also be set up. Yet all these efforts may have been insufficient in themselves. Whereas the initial experiments with teams had been strongly motivated by improving the quality of working life, in the late 1980s' teams had started to become associated with increased performance (Benders & Van Hootegem, 1999). This changing attitude toward the phenomenon of teams was also visible in U.S. management literature (e.g., Peters, 1987). Even though typical U.S. interpretations of teams, such as high performance work teams (Appelbaum & Batt, 1994), are conceptually distinct from Dutch sociotechnical teams, the increased perception of teams as being beneficial to performance (see, e.g., Van Amelsvoort & Scholtes, 1997) may have been decisive for them to become more than a marginal phenomenon.

Implications for Practitioners

For practicing managers, intensive press coverage of an innovative organization concept can create the impression that one is not in line with current developments and thus lagging behind competitors. This impression may induce managers to adopt organization concepts without sufficiently considering their intrinsic value to these managers' organizations. Managers should be wary of viewing business media trends as indicative of actual trends in the practical applications of organization concepts. The business press is involved

in continuously identifying new and progressive ideas (Clark, 2004). In other words, the "newsworthiness" of concepts is a key consideration in determining what is published and thus given attention. These are not necessarily the concepts that continue to make the largest impact on the everyday functioning of organizations. As our data show a surprising stability in the number of organizations that apply a previously fashionable concepts, managers should thus take a critical stance toward the business media and may look to other information sources to stay in tune with actual business developments.

Conclusion

With regards to our central research question, we concluded that the life cycle of discourse promoting the fashionable management technique of SMTs only partially coevolves with the life cycle of this technique's diffusion across organizations. This led us to reevaluate Abrahamson and Fairchild's (1999) reasoning underpinning their proposition. Specifically, we object to a simplistic model where the media have direct influences on collective beliefs held by managers. Rogers (1995) suggested that the media create awareness of a managerial innovation, whereas interpersonal channels within networks are relatively more important for the persuasion to adopt an innovation. The keyword here, however, is *relatively*. We do not negate the possibility that some individual press articles may indeed have a sizeable impact on practitioners, thereby influencing managerial beliefs and actions.

This points in the direction of two specific areas of investigation. First, one of the challenges of research in management fashions is to break away from the focus on the production side of fashions, specifically studying print media, and instead perform perception analyses to discover the ways in which various types of discourse influence and persuade decision makers to adopt organization concepts. Finally, another limit of PMI is that it fails to take into account varieties of discourse other than the business and academic press. An important question is what managers consider to be the most important sources of information about organization concepts. Whether, and to what extent, Internet is used as an information source concerning organization concepts is an open question. Furthermore, authors have also noted the persuasive powers of types of discourse such as management bestsellers (Kieser, 1997) or workshops and conferences featuring management gurus (Jackson, 1996). Especially the latter, potentially very powerful, tools for persuasion and creating enthusiasm for an organization concept are difficult to incorporate when looking at fashions from the perspective of a life cycle. Because data on annual sales of book titles are hard

to get, and attendance figures of specific (series of) conferences are not even necessarily recorded and stored, these types of discourse have not received much academic attention. In addition, important diffusion channels may be outside of public discourse, such as when concepts are introduced into organizations by consultants. For instance, David and Strang (2006) found evidence that, on the supply side of the market for management ideas, consulting firms continue to offer TQM services long after media attention for the concept fell.

In terms of studying how fashions evolve in organizational praxis, the fashion of SMTs in the Netherlands seems to have left an enduring impact. The results show that trends in discourse are not necessarily indicative of trends in the application of organization concepts in praxis. However, future research on the impact of management fashions on praxis might paint a clearer picture of the possible configurations of adoption, rejection, entrenchment, or sedimentation of popular organization concepts. Ideally, such data should also distinguish between rhetorical and substantive adopters. As stated above, information about the gross number of adopters or rejecters is lost in aggregate prevalence data that, when compared to prevalence data measured at other points in time, can only show a net growth or decline. If such distinctions could be made in longitudinal research, it may answer many remaining questions, such as: what is the average life span of once-fashionable concepts in user organizations? Even as prevalence data show a decline in organizations applying concepts, how many new adopters are hidden in the data? How many organizations use functional equivalents of popular organization concepts but use a different label not considered fashionable? And vice versa? Unfortunately, given the cost of acquiring such data, they are rare—if not nonexistent—which has led us to use three available data sources. We used an interpretative approach to triangulate an overall picture: We thus see no signs of a massive shift away from teams among user organizations in the Netherlands, compared to the downswing visible in discourse. The results indicate that our choice to use multiple, if partly incompatible, sources was justified; had we, for instance, only been able to use OSA as a single source, it would seem that the prevalence of teams remained almost constantly at around 70% of user organizations throughout the period of interest. This would have entailed the conclusion that the surge in discourse about teams was completely decoupled from the surge in the prevalence of teams. This point emphasizes, once more, the dependency on the choices made by other researchers when using secondary sources. The reported prevalence of organization concepts may be as much an artifact of the research design as the empirical phenomenon in itself.

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