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Knowledge production in consulting teams

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KEYWORDS

Self-organization;
Management consulting;
Consulting teams;
Knowledge production;
Cognitive feedback

Summary The central thesis of this paper is that the production of knowledge in consulting teams can neither be understood as the result of an internal interaction between clients and consultants decoupled from the wider socio-political environment nor as externally determined by socially constructed industry recipes or management fashions detached from the cognitive uniqueness of the client–consultant team. Instead, we argue that knowledge production in consulting teams is intrinsically linked to the institutional environment that not only provides resources such as funding, manpower, or legitimacy but also offers cognitive feedback through which knowledge production is influenced. By applying the theory of self-organization to the knowledge production in consulting teams, we explain how consulting teams are structured by the socio-cultural environment and are structuring this environment to continue their work. The consulting team's knowledge is shaped and influenced by cognitive feedback loops that involve external collective actors such as the client organization, practice groups of consulting firms, the academic/professional community, and the general public who essentially become co-producers of consulting knowledge.

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Introduction

Unlike manufacturing firms that can derive their competitive advantage from patented technologies, cost-effective locations, or unique products, management consulting firms gain their competitive advantage primarily from having the ability to create and sustain knowledge resources (Werr & Stjernberg, 2003) and institutional capital based on legitimacy, reputation or client relationships (Reihlen, Smets, & Veit, 2010). Mastering knowledge production and management is therefore particularly important for consultancy firms. Prior

research has analyzed the production of consulting knowledge from two very different perspectives. From an internal perspective, scholars have investigated different knowledge-management practices (Hansen, Nohria, & Tierney, 1999; Morris & Empson, 1998; Werr, 2002), the nature of knowledge work (Alvesson, 2001; Starbuck, 1992), and organizational elements that encourage or inhibit knowledge development in consulting firms (Anand, Gardner, & Morris, 2007; Heusinkveld & Benders, 2005). Furthermore, research has pointed out that clients co-produce or co-create consulting knowledge together with consultants (Bettencourt, Ostrom, Brown, & Roundtree, 2002; Fosstenøkken, Løwendahl, & Revang, 2003; Hislop, 2002). Much of this research is based on the assumption that knowledge creation can best be understood by studying consulting firms or client–consultant teams. For example, Bettencourt et al. (2002) stress the need to consider clients as 'partial employees' of consulting companies and to manage their co-production of consulting

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services. Only a few studies recognize that external actors can take part in the knowledge development within consulting teams and identify this as an important issue for future research (i.e., Fosstenlökken et al., 2003; Hislop, 2002).

From an external perspective, researchers have directed their attention to study the institutional embeddedness of the production of consulting knowledge. The underlying assumption of these investigations is that the socio-cultural context in which knowledge is produced strongly influences its content. For instance, researchers into management fashions (Abrahamson, 1996; Kieser, 1997; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2001) argue that management knowledge is socially constructed by a fashion-setting community composed of the elite consulting firms, the large accounting conglomerates, management gurus, and business schools. Management fashions become transitory rationality myths that are used as a standard for evaluating the usefulness of knowledge for framing and handling managerial problems (Benders & van Veen, 2001; Kieser, 1997; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2001). The focus here is on the macro processes of knowledge development: on how organizational 'actors within the field [of management knowledge] produce an informal structure that innovates new managerial knowledge and regulates its production and consumption' (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2001, p. 950). The interaction between organizational actors and specific client–consultant teams, where the actual knowledge production and dissemination takes place, is not at the heart of these studies.

So far, research has paid only scant attention to integrating the internal and external view on the production of consulting knowledge (Sturdy, Werr, & Buono, 2009). Knowledge is pictured as either produced internally by consultants in collaboration with clients decoupled from the wider socio-political environment or externally determined by industry recipes, management fashions, and the *zeitgeist* detached from the unique experience, creativity, and case-specific idiosyncrasies of the client–consultant team. We argue that such integration is critical if we are to better understand the nature of professional knowledge production. As Anand et al. (2007, p. 426) suggest, 'a more nuanced research design is required to explain fully how internal and external forces interact in the creation of knowledge-based structures [and knowledge in general].' (See also Hislop, 2002).

In order to study this interaction between the external context and internal processes, we choose the client–consultant team as our focal unit of analysis as this is where the main part of consulting knowledge development takes place (Bettencourt et al., 2002; Fosstenlökken et al., 2003; Hislop, 2002). We argue that knowledge production in client–consultant teams is intrinsically linked to the institutional environment that not only provides resources such as funding, manpower, or legitimacy but also offers cognitive feedback through which professional practices are regulated or influenced. Thus, the question we address in this article is how client–consultant teams structure and interact with their environment as the milieu for consulting knowledge production; what is the nature of the circular processes of influence between client–consultant teams and external collective actors that lead to the creation, legitimization and dissemination of consulting knowledge? Our approach is based on the theory of self-organization, notably the works of the German sociologists Krohn and Küppers (1989, 1990a, 1990c, 1992a,

1992b), Krohn, Küppers, and Paslack (1991), and Küppers (2002) on self-organization of science, which we reframe on the basis of (empirical) insights from the management consulting sector. The theory of self-organization replaces the idea of adaptation with the concept of structuring, implying that client–consultant teams not only enact their environment in the sense Weick (1979) introduced this notion, but engage actively in creating favorable conditions for their operation.

This paper contributes to a theory of professional knowledge production in several ways. First, by outlining the specifics of the cognitive feedback loops influencing the work of client–consultant teams, this paper provides a differentiated picture of the nature of consulting knowledge production as a circular, multidimensional, and interactive social process. It outlines the underlying activities and processes that client–consultant teams need to master in order to be (seen as) successful. Second, by utilizing a new theoretical lens and existing empirical findings, we explain the micro processes of knowledge production and dissemination and their interrelation with the macro processes of creation and institutionalization of new management concepts and models, an issue which is still under-researched in the existing literature.

The paper is structured as follows: first, we explain the origins of the theory of self-organizing systems and show its relevance for the study of the knowledge production process within consulting. Next, we describe the self-organization of client–consultant teams by differentiating three social accomplishments that client–consultant teams need for survival and success as a social group. Then, we discuss in detail four structurally different relations in which client–consultant teams are embedded and explain how these teams act on their environment to continually strive to have this environment create favorable conditions for their operation. Simultaneously, we outline how different collective actors in the environment—the consulting firm and its practice groups, the client organization, the professional community, and the wider public—influence the working of the client–consultant team. We conclude our paper by outlining implications for future research.

The theory of self-organizing systems

Rather unnoticed by the mainstream literature, concepts of self-organization, self-referentiality of systems, or of autopoieses have quietly invaded various disciplines in the natural and social sciences (for an overview see Jantsch, 1980; Krohn et al., 1991). In the social sciences, concepts of self-organization have been introduced by sociologists (Krohn & Küppers, 1989; Luhmann, 1984), organizational psychologists (Weick, 1979), economists (Hayek, 1983), and management theorists (Hedberg, Nystrom, & Starbuck, 1976; Stacey, 1995). The concept of self-organization indicates a paradigm shift from the traditional system's understanding, which is rooted either in the mechanistic program of positivism or the descriptive program of phenomenology (e.g., Bunge, 1999, pp. 17–44; Krohn et al., 1991). The term self-organization is frequently used to describe the spontaneous emergence of order through the interactions of a system's elements (Kauffman, 1993). In science, for example, the recursive interac-

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