Born in the US raised in Denmark

Exploring the cocreation of a management concept

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BORN IN THE US RAISED IN DENMARK: EXPLORING THE COCREATION OF A MANAGEMENT CONCEPT

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INTRODUCTION

Understanding the spread of management concepts such as lean management and total quality management has been of continuing interest to organizational scholars (Abrahamson, 1996; Ansari, Fiss, & Zajac, 2010; Cooper, Ezzamel, & Qu, 2017). Often, the spread of management concepts is assumed to evolve through certain phases in which a critical role is played by supply-side actors such as business schools, management gurus, business media and management consultancies (Abrahamson, 1996; Sturdy, 2018; Sahlin-Andersson & Engwall 2002). For instance, it has been stressed that management consultancies "sense incipient preferences" that guide demand for management knowledge (Abrahamson, 1996: 264) and develop "convincing rhetoric" to interest clients (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005; Zbaracki, 1998). Although the rhetoric may be convincing, management concepts are not just forced onto passive organizations or "gullible managers" (Abrahamson, 1996: 205). Rather, scholars have suggested that demand-side actors such as adopting organizations also perform adapting maneuvers of management concepts (Ansari, Fiss, & Zajac, 2010; Czarniawska & Sevón, 1996; Morris & Lancaster, 2006; Reay et al., 2013) and are sometimes actively involved in popularizing management concepts (van Veen, Bezemer, & Karsten, 2011).

Despite increased acknowledgement of the importance of both supply- and demand-side actors, most research tends to prioritize either the supply or the demand side. As a result, we still know little about how supply- and demand-side actors interact in the context of management concepts as they are (re)produced, translated, and spread in an interplay between a network of actors including consultants, adopting organizations, educational institutions and publishers (Heusinkveld, Sturdy, & Werr, 2011; O'Mahoney et al., 2013). To advance new insights we pay attention to the notion of cocreation (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004) as an essential component of how supply and demand sides interact guided by the following research question: How are management concepts cocreated in the nexus of supply- and demand-side actors?

We draw on data from a longitudinal case study of how the American-born Leadership Pipeline concept (Charan, Drotter, & Noel, 2000) was translated and widely spread as it entered the Danish public sector. The pipeline concept was initially introduced in Denmark through private companies, but, driven by a group of researchers and consultants, the concept was then transformed into a "Public Leadership Pipeline" (Dahl & Molly-Søholm, 2012). Soon this adapted concept started to take on a remarkable life of its own as it was appropriated by adopting organizations,

educational institutions, and other intermediaries. In particular, close collaboration between consultancies, researchers, and adopting organizations became essential in making the Leadership Pipeline fit the Danish public-sector context, and in the subsequent spreading of the concept.

LITERATURE BACKGROUND

How management concepts are spread in the market of management knowledge is studied within different streams of literature. As a rough approximation, this literature can be divided into perspectives that either underscore the agentic capacities of the supply side or demand side. These kinds of literatures have tended to take a downstream focus, concentrating on how management concepts are first developed by the supply-side industry and then adapted and modified as they travel into organizations (Røvik, 2016; Wæraas & Nielsen, 2016). In other words, it tends to neglect how the translation and spread of management concepts simultaneously involve downstream and upstream movements. Further, whereas supply- and demand-side-focused literatures tend to reduce their focus to one side only, despite recognizing the involvement of many actors, it is unlikely that one single actor leads or is active in the process of translating and spreading management concepts. As Perkmann and Spicer (2008) note, it is more likely an instance of "partaking" where various actors participate in the spread of a management concept.

Responding to scholarly calls for a better understanding of the reciprocal interaction between supply and demand sides, some recent studies allude to the joint creation or consumption of management concepts as a way to underline the relational aspect of producing management concepts (Heusinkveld & Benders, 2012; Heusinkveld et al., 2011). From this perspective, it is emphasized how, for instance, adopting organizations may also play an active role in driving the spread of management concepts within a field, industry, or sector (Van Veen, Bezemer, & Karsten, 2011; Sturdy, 2018). Accordingly, a hyperbolic view on the supply side runs the risk of silencing or muting client organizations or other intermediaries. Similarly, an unbalanced focus on demand-side dynamics may risk overlooking the role of the producers (Ansari, Fiss, & Zajac, 2010; Heusinkveld, Benders, & Hillebrand, 2013). Current literature may recognize the importance of supply–demand-side interactions, yet, how such efforts are leveraged and how joint creation takes place still lacks significant scholarly attention.

Initially used by scholars to address the cocreation of value (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004), the notion of cocreation is now used to analyze the cocreation of practices, products, brands, and routines inside and across teams, departments, workplaces, and organizations (Girard & Stark 2002; Hatch & Schultz, 2010). The notion of cocreation suggests a "joint creation of value by the company and the customer; allowing customers to co-construct the service experience to suit their context" (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004: 8). Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) suggest that cocreation contains a dialogic engagement with the costumer and joint problem solving. Although the notion of cocreation was popularized by Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004), the idea of organizations collaboratively creating value is also discernable in various other writings. Of particular relevance for our understanding of how management concepts are cocreated is the emphasis in this literature on the ability of interdependent actors to mutually work together and innovatively construct, recombine, valuate, and exploit resources. As Stark (2011) suggests, actors in the modern knowledge economy are not merely connected through hierarchies or markets, but rather through *heterarchies*, characterized by decentralization of authority and flexible, shifting structural arrangements aimed toward exploitation and exploration of old and new ideas (Stark, 2011: 210). As Gehman et al. (2013: 106) note, "heterarchies involve relations of interdependence

wherein authority is distributed, accountability is lateral, monitoring is mutual, and justifications are multiple." In such arrangements, cocreation is an unpredictable, albeit active and innovative process, always involving agency, but rarely preplanned or engineered by one single actor. Stark (2011) contrasts the crosscutting network structures of the heterarchies with the vertical authority of hierarchies. As products, concepts, or practices circulate in the heterarchical structure, they may contain multiple tags or interpretations and become influential precisely because of the polycentric structure of heterarchies. Although heterarchies may be considered flattened hierarchies, they are not nonhierarchical or apolitical; hence, this theoretical focus involves considerations about power (im)balances between actors during the cocreation of management concepts. Indeed, certain actors may become powerful in the heterarchical structuring, but such power acquisition may also be a result of informality and associations rather than formal or central hierarchical attempts at structuring and controlling products, concepts, or practices.

METHODOLOGY

To explore supply–demand side interactions as processes of cocreation, we investigated how the Leadership Pipeline concept (Charan, Drotter, & Noel, 2000) was translated and spread in the Danish public sector. Although Leadership Pipeline is widely recognized in government agencies and public hospitals, we chose to focus on Danish municipalities, of which approximately 55% had adopted the concept in 2017. We leverage a multi-method approach (Pritchard, 2012), building on three sets of empirical data. Firstly, a survey, which included responses from 92 municipalities (94%), of which 52, had adopted the pipeline concept. Secondly, on the supply side we interviewed leading consultants in the field, including the two consultants/researchers who initially developed and launched the Public Leadership Pipeline through an action-research program. We also interviewed the publisher of the Danish book, who also co-facilitated the conferences promoting the Danish book. On the demand side, we interviewed managers from four adopting municipalities, who had been actively involved in the translation and spread of the pipeline concept in the Danish public sector. We conducted interviews with managers and HR consultants from the four municipalities. As such, the interviews were central to understanding how adopting/client organizations collaborated and worked together with consultancies. In total, we conducted 26 interviews with key stakeholders of approximately 1 hour each that we transcribed verbatim. Thirdly, we included a range of documents and archival material in our analysis.

To map our process data we used a temporal bracketing strategy and exploited insights from the temporal sensitivity in process organization studies (Langley, 1999;). We inferred three key phases in 2011–2018 (Table 2), which although partially overlapping unfolded in a chronological order. Inspired by the notion of cocreation, we analyzed the activities underpinning the translation and spread of Leadership Pipeline. Looking across the three phases, and relying on an open coding strategy, we inferred actions and descriptions in the material that described cocreation activities. We developed first-order themes by staying true to informant expressions (Gioia, Corley & Hamilton, 2013), as illustrated in Table 3. Through an iterative process of reviewing the first-order themes and continuous comparing, we started to generate second-order codes, which helped us develop three key cocreation activities: (1) circumventing roles, (2) connecting spokespersons, and (3) leveraging mutually valued outcomes. Doing so, allow us to develop three key activities in understanding the cocreation of management concepts in the nexus of supply-side and demand-side actors.

COCREATION IN PRACTICE

Overall, our longitudinal case study shows how a management concept was reframed into a Public Leadership Pipeline, then boosted and spread in Danish municipalities and finally maintained and extended. Throughout our analysis, it was that a clear distinction between the supply and demand side quickly dissolved. Drawing on these insights, we identify and theorize three key cocreation activities spanning the supply and demand sides: (1) circumventing roles, (2) connecting spokespersons, and (3) leveraging mutually valued outcome.

Circumventing roles: The first cocreation activity refers to the act of supply-side actors displacing their own expertise in certain ways and encourage collaboration with demand-side actors. Circumventing roles, we argue, is a well-known activity during cocreation. For instance, the toy manufacturer LEGO uses online platforms to allow users of their products to help qualify their brand and development efforts, hence exchanging a role as single designer and producer of toys to one as co-designer with the users (Hatch & Schultz, 2010). In the context of management concepts, the circumvention of roles has two important properties; activating the demand-side and encourage collaboration through supply-side acting in a neutral and exploring role. Firstly, activating the demand-side relates to how the supplier craft resonance at the demand-side (Bourgoin & Harvey, 2018) and how demand-side actors start taking over the vision of the consultants. In our case, we see the consultants positioning demand-side actors as the "true experts," turning them into suppliers of knowledge and themselves into curious researchers acting in a partially neutral intermediary position. Resonating with the argument made by Cooren et al. (2006), the consultants downplay their contribution as experts but are still contributing to framing the concept in a facilitative role, viz., becoming more influential. This maneuver activates the demand-side and provides a first step in "blurring the boundaries between production and consumption" (Heusinkveld et al., 2011: 144), and show how the role of supply and demand actors may change in a dynamic way. Secondly, as the demand-side actors become active they also starts to experiment with the concept in new ways, for instance, the concept is used to address issues related to current political reforms in our case. This ensure a "pragmatic" legitimation of the concept, which rely on a "sort of exchange legitimacy" (Suchman, 1995: 578) between supply- and demand-side actors. As such, a collaborative experimentation begins to take place and management concepts are not just "processed" or "disseminated" by convincing rhetoric from the supply-side (Van Veen, Bezemer & Karsten, 2011), rather, they are gaining new abilities which fertilize the ground for making management concepts spread.

Connecting spokespersons: A second cocreation activity is the ability to connect multiple spokespersons across supply and demand side boundaries who speak and act on behalf of the management concept. This activity vividly illustrate the argument made by Akrich, Callon, and Latour (2002) that successful innovations rely on "good spokespersons" (279), which are able to speak as a legitimate representative of an organization or a collective of actors. Further it gives empirical credence to the decentralized "partaking" described by Perkman & Spicer (2008: 836), stressing how multiple actors across supply and demand boundaries contribute by telling "the good story" about a management concept. As such, it becomes visible not only how management gurus, business media and management consultancies promote and communicate new concepts (Sahlin-Andersson & Engwall, 2002), but also how demand-side actors partake in this process (Perkman & Spicer 2008). In particular, we emphasize how spokespersons from both the supply- and demand side in collaboration speak on the behalf of the concept and their respective organizations. In the Leadership Pipeline case, we see how multiple spokespersons were connected and how supply-

side actors facilitate venues and sites for the joint framing, boosting and maintenance of the concept. For instance, we observed how public managers collaborated with consultants as they acted as co-presenters at conferences and educational activities, and started doing peer-to-peer dissemination. Through these activities, the various spokespersons provided accounts of the management concept and engaged in practices of justifying the worth of the concept across organizations (Stark, 2011). Often the spokespersons were using the work of the consultants and authors of the Danish book as a central point of reference, thereby continuously directing the concept toward the consultants who remained attractive passage points. Hence, the consultants stayed connected with client organizations and gradually extended the network of allies. Connecting spokespersons who are legitimate representatives for their respective organizations enable multiple evaluations of the concept and ensure a joint legitimation from multiple actors (Gehman et al., 2013: Stark, 2011: 15). Moreover, these co-presentations from municipal spokespersons explicate how these organizations have grounded the concept into their local practices, hence, the multiple spokespersons amplify the value of the concept.

Leveraging mutually valued outcomes: A third cocreation activity relates to the leveraging of joint interests and mutually valued outcomes. In our study, the Public Leadership Pipeline gained strength as it allowed various actors to "borrow freely from its conceptual apparatus and draw on its methods to boost their own authority" (Eyal, 2013: 876); hence, lateral patterns of authority became visible (Stark, 2011). Consultants as well as public managers were able to borrow from the conceptual apparatus of the Leadership Pipeline, translate and appropriate the concept for their respective purposes, and allow municipalities to act as thought leaders on public leadership. While many different outcomes appeared and some of them even were contested, not least through the court case, these outcomes were in general mutually valued by managers in the municipalities and the consultants. Following Stark (2011: 7), we may say that this activity underscores the mutual process of valuation, where the Leadership Pipeline concept gets promoted and given or added value in a heterarchical order between supply- and demand-side actors. Indeed, this was already visible in early stages as some municipalities started to experiment with the concept and the consultants start telling about good experiences in certain municipalities. Yet leveraging mutually valued outcomes became a dominating activity at a later stage as the consultants encouraged organizations to experiment further with the concept and embraced and leveraged the new conceptual variations. By actively connecting with the new conceptual variations, the consultants amplified the joint interest of the clients and the consultants, thereby leveraging mutually valued outcomes. Both supply- and demand-side actors rely on the interpretive flexibility inscribed into the management concept to enable conceptual variations. As such, this activity resonate Heusinkveld et al.'s (2013) argument that a new label may enhance legitimacy of a concept but also stretch the concept to cover more areas, hence, maintain the concept's relevance.

Importantly, the three activities are not isolated but linked together and animate each other. Doing so, contribute to a local grounding and contextual fit of the concept, hence, the concept appear as increasingly meaningful and legitimate to other organizations (Ansari et al., 2010).

CONTRIBUTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Questioning the supply- and demand-side divide is a foundational stance in our cocreation approach. While supply and demand sides of management concepts, as mentioned, have tended to be investigated through separate studies, we open up this divide in our study. As our case study reveals, it is not possible to explain the translation and spread of the Public Leadership Pipeline in

Denmark by pointing to a single consultancy, an academic institution, or certain distribution channels as single suppliers of management knowledge (Abrahamson, 1996; Ernst & Kieser, 2002). Hence, our study reveals the pitfalls of understanding management concepts either from supply- or demand-side perspectives. Our framework enables a nuanced account of how management concepts are translated and spread through ongoing cocreation activities. The cocreative activities and the polycentric character of this process affords a sensitivity toward the ecology of translation (Sahlin & Wedlin, 2017) that extends and maintains a management concept and the dynamics of supply–demand nexuses where positions are likely to dwindle and shift.

A second outcome of our study, relates to opening up the black box of supply- and demand-side interaction and the workings cocreation in this nexus. We suggest that the interaction between supply- and demand-side actors acquires a heterarchical organizational character (Stark, 2011) instead of having a more downstream character (i.e., *from* supply side *to* demand side). In particular, by drawing from the Leadership Pipeline case, we have investigated the workings of cocreation and identified three distinct activities —circumventing roles, connecting spokespersons, and leveraging mutually shared outcomes. These three activities work as key building blocks of the cocreation of a management concept and all illustrate a facilitative and dialogic or dual-stream approach to advancing management concepts. Paraphrasing Stark (2011: 23), we may say that the real unit of the spread of management concepts is neither a demand-side nor a supply-side actor but rather a "network of firms" acting in complex "patterns of strategic alliances." While the consultants may capitalize most on the proliferation of the concept, the heterarchical perspective exactly underscores how the concept also performs other forms of value to, for instance, client organizations and public-sector managers.

A third contribution relates to the literature on translation in organizational research (Czarniawska & Sevon, 1996). Drawing on the seminal work of Latour (1984) and Callon (1984), translation scholars have investigated how the spread of a management concept unfold in a "chain of translations," as ideas do not diffuse but transpose, displace, and change as they travel (Lawrence, 2017; Sahlin & Wedlin, 2017; Tracey, Dalpiaz, & Phillips, 2018). We add to this literature by emphasizing the importance of how actors are "translating together." Indeed, our case provides empirical support for this argument; it was through an experimental approach of bringing supply- and demand-side actors together that the Public Leadership Pipeline was formulated, got traction, and in the end became widely adopted.

In sum, we have advanced current understandings of the cocreative role of supply-side and demand-side actors in the translation and spread of management concepts, hence challenging the image of the client as a passive recipient. Our analysis highlights a more agentic approach to the client and shows the dual-sided translations that take place when a management concept proliferates.

REFERENCES AVAILABLE FROM THE AUTHORS