



# On sedimentation in management fashion: an institutional perspective

On sedimentation  
in management  
fashion

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper aims to explore how management practitioners make sense of management fashions as sedimented elements within organizations.

**Design/methodology/approach** – To further understanding about sedimentation in management fashion, an institutional perspective was used.

**Findings** – This analysis reveals that sedimented fashions within organizations are framed as comprising different forms that are systematically associated with divergent evolution patterns.

**Research limitations/implications** – This study extends the current literature on management fashion by showing how, unlike present conceptualizations, the long-term impact of fashionable ideas in organizations cannot be considered a single entity with a uniform pattern of development. Building on this, the paper seeks to develop a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the evolution of popular management ideas in organizational practice, which opens fruitful new research directions.

**Practical implications** – This paper may help managers, as important consumers of fashionable ideas, to better understand how elements of fashions may remain in organizations and play an important conditional role in future change initiatives.

**Originality/value** – Despite the substantial attention to the field-level dissemination and evolution of popular management ideas in the management fashion literature, the possible long-term impact of these ideas within organizations has received scant attention beyond the assumed transience of a fashion's discourse and the possible persistence of the organizational practices associated with a fashion.

**Keywords** Management fashion, Consumption of management ideas, Sedimentation, Managers

**Paper type** Case study

## Introduction

Swings in the popularity of management ideas have always attracted much attention from management scholars and practitioners alike (Bendix, 1956; Guillén, 1994). Terms such as “fashions,” “hypes,” and “fads” are used frequently in the management press. Since the mid 1990s the term “management fashion” (Abrahamson, 1996; Kieser, 1997) has become prominent in the academic debates on the dissemination and evolution of these ideas (ten Bos, 2000; Benders and van Veen, 2001; Clark, 2004; Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall, 2002). Apart from a substantial body of work that studies the general field-level evolution of these ideas (e.g. Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999; Heusinkveld and Benders, 2001; David and Strang, 2006; Nijholt and Benders, 2007), there is an



emerging stream of research that concentrates on implementation and use of management fashions in organizational practice, thereby addressing the plea to study the “consumption side” of the management knowledge market (Suddaby and Greenwood, 2001; Clark, 2004; Engwall and Kipping, 2004; Fincham and Roslender, 2004; Sturdy, 2004). This latter stream of research on a management fashion’s intra-organizational “implementation” increasingly provides insight into how they can have substantial intended and unintended consequences within organizations (DeCock and Hipkin, 1997; Sturdy and Fleming, 2003; Benders and Verlaar, 2003; Nicolai and Dautwiz, 2010).

But what can we say about how management practitioners make sense of these management ideas beyond an implementation phase? Gaining further insight into this is of particular relevance given that the recurrent patterns of management fashion urged various scholars to warn against the danger of reinventing the wheel and the underutilization of organizational knowledge (Lammers, 1988; Guillén, 1994; Jacques, 1996). Moreover, although theorists see the way these ideas evolve in practice as a key issue that “begs for further analysis” (Barley and Kunda, 1992, p. 394; see also Clark, 2004), little research has been devoted to the possible long-term effects of management fashions within organizations. An emerging stream of research suggest that organizations may keep using particular fashions after the hype even though the fashion’s label is no longer in vogue in the managerial discourse (Beck and Walgenbach, 2005; Nijholt and Benders, 2007; Perkmann and Spicer, 2008). In addition, drawing on the notion of sedimentation, Røvik argued that former popular management ideas may resist the pressure for change so that “prescriptions that have become obsolete may have become very entrenched in organizations” (Røvik, 1996, p. 163). However, until now, little organization-level research has been devoted to how the long-term effects of management fashions in organizations are made sense of beyond the assumed transience of a fashion’s discourse and the possible persistence of the organizational practices associated with a fashion. Rather, in the current literature, entrenched fashions in organizations are still conceptualized as a single and homogeneous entity with a uniform evolution pattern.

Using an institutional perspective (Berger and Luckmann, 1967; Tolbert and Zucker, 1996), this study explores how management practitioners make sense of management fashions as sedimented elements within organizations. Drawing on in-depth interview data, our analysis reveals that sedimented fashions within organizations are framed as comprising different forms that are systematically associated with divergent evolution patterns. As a result, we extend the current literature on management fashion by showing how, unlike present conceptualizations, the long-term impact of fashionable ideas in organizations cannot be understood as a single and homogeneous entity with a uniform pattern of development. Building on this, the paper seeks to develop a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the evolution of popular management ideas in organizational practice, which opens up fruitful new research directions.

### **Transience and persistence in management fashion research**

In the current management fashion literature, the evolution of popular management ideas is seen as a product of a cyclical and institutionalized process between different key actors on the market for management knowledge (Abrahamson, 1996; Kieser, 1997;

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Suddaby and Greenwood, 2001). As we will discuss in the next sections, whilst there is a substantial body of work that conceptualizes the evolution of these ideas as particularly short-lived, there is an emerging stream of research that concentrates on the possible long-term impact and “sedimentation” of management fashions.

A first, and still dominant line of work, sees the field level evolution of management ideas as a bell-shaped pattern in which a rapid growth is quickly followed by a sharp decline in attention (Gill and Whittle, 1993; Huczynski, 1993; Abrahamson, 1996). Although various studies have identified notable differences between the evolution of discourse between different countries (Benders and van Bijsterveld, 2000) or professional groups (Heusinkveld and Benders, 2001; Braam *et al.*, 2007), the lifecycle thesis has been empirically supported by various studies of print media discourse (Carson *et al.*, 1999; Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999; Giroux, 2006). Some theorists even argue that, in time, life-spans of management ideas tend to shorten and their intensity becomes higher (Kieser, 1997; Carson *et al.*, 1999). In line with this, fashion research suggests that the field-level adoption and abandonment of a management idea by a population of organizations co-evolves with the up- and downswing in the general managerial discourse (David and Strang, 2006). For instance, Abrahamson and Fairchild report that the unfavorable tenor and downswing of quality circles (QC) discourse in the US business media during the mid-1980s reinforced a large-scale abandonment of the QC label across populations of US firms (Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999, p. 732).

A second and emerging stream of research on the evolution of popular management ideas indicates that there is more “continuity” than the rapid turnover of new labels in the managerial discourse would suggest (Lammers, 1988; Barley and Kunda, 1992; Jacques, 1996). For example, Bendix (1956) observes that old ideas have been rephrased in a new language in order to regain widespread acceptance, or in his words: “Traditional ideologies have been formulated anew in the terminology which have been currently fashionable” (Bendix, 1956, p. 342). Building on the seminal work of Bendix, Guillén (1994) reveals that important elements of the three basic approaches that were established in the early twentieth century are incorporated in fashionable management ideas of the 1990s, such as Lean Production and TQM. Røvik (1996) argued that former fashions may remain in organizations and become “sedimented”, that is, unfashionable concepts have been preserved and permanently incorporated in an organization’s daily practices. Also other theorists have indicated that organizations may keep using the practices associated with a fashionable management idea even though the label and the language may no longer be in vogue in the managerial discourse (Guillén, 1994; Benders, 1999; Noon *et al.*, 2000; Beck and Walgenbach, 2005; Nijholt and Benders, 2007). For example, while the managerial discourse on ISO 9000 gradually silenced and the management idea became increasingly criticized for reducing the flexibility of organizations, empirical evidence shows that this was paralleled by a steady increase in the number of organizations that have obtained or applied for a certificate, indicating that in organizational practice “. . . the standards have become increasingly institutionalized” (Beck and Walgenbach, 2005, p. 844). In a similar way Cole (1999) argued that the decrease in the use of TQM language coincided with organizations actually “doing” it thereby suggesting that the organizational practices initially associated with TQM remained as “building blocks”

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for new change initiatives (DeCock and Hipkin, 1997; Benders, 1999; Easton and Jarrell, 2000).

More recent work has identified important factors that may inhibit or enhance the long-term impact of fashions. Here theorists related the “long-term viability” of fashions to human agency (Perkmann and Spicer, 2008). Using longitudinal case studies, Stjernberg and Philips (1993) found that both the introduction and establishment of new concepts in organizations highly depends on the presence of management practitioners and their actions to maintain legitimacy. In line with this, Perkmann and Spicer (2008) reveal various types of institutional entrepreneurship as important factors that increase the likelihood of institutionalization of fashions. Another stream of literature emphasizes the complexities in understanding specific conditions under which adopted management fashions are likely to persist or erode. It is stressed that a management fashion becomes “translated” in different ways (Benders and van Veen, 2001; Nicolai and Dautwiz, 2010; Ansari *et al.*, 2010) and associated with all kinds of intended and unintended consequences within an organization during its implementation (Knights and McCabe, 1998; Benders and Verlaar, 2003; Sturdy and Fleming, 2003;) and therefore its intra-organizational trajectory cannot be predicted easily (DeCock and Hipkin, 1997; Zbaracki, 1998; Kelemen, 2000). As Watson observes: “. . . the pattern that is left is rarely a neat one and is never predictable” (Watson, 1986, p. 47).

In sum, our discussion of the fashion literature reveals that theorists have provided important insights into the evolution of management fashions. There is an emerging stream of research that suggests that organizations may keep using the practices associated with a fashionable management idea even though its language may no longer be in vogue, and provides important factors that may inhibit or enhance the long-term impact of fashions. However, until now, little organization-level research has been devoted to how these long-term effects of management fashions in organizations are made sense of beyond the assumed transience of a fashion’s discourse and persistence of their practices and the significance of specific conditions under which the practices of adopted management fashions are likely to persist or erode. As a result, entrenched fashions are still largely conceptualized as a single and homogeneous entity with a uniform evolution pattern. To address these limitations of the current research we outline an institutional perspective below.

### **Sedimentation**

In this section, we further explore the way management practitioners make sense of management fashions as sedimented elements within organizations by drawing on an institutional perspective. We use this perspective because it helps in understanding how management fashions may persist in organizations and become considered to have an enduring effect on the organizations’ functioning in various ways (Berger and Luckmann, 1967; Røvik, 1996).

Institutional theorists consider ideas and practices as sedimented when they have moved through a process of institutionalization (Zucker, 1977; Tolbert and Zucker, 1996; Scott, 2001; Greenwood *et al.*, 2002) to become regarded an enduring part of organizational practice, or as a common stock of knowledge of management practitioners (Berger and Luckmann, 1967; Zucker, 1977; Zeitz *et al.*, 1999; Hasselbladh and Kallinikos, 2000). Following Berger and Luckmann (1967) and Tolbert and Zucker

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(1996), theorists explain that these entrenched patterns of organizational behavior are preceded by processes of “habitualization” and “objectivation”. During iterative rounds of action and sense making, routinized ways of thinking and acting crystallize and shape people’s interpretations of social reality leading to “cognitive convergence” (Scott, 2001). Or as Scott phrases it, “Meanings arise in interactions with are maintained and transformed as they are employed to make sense of ongoing stream of happenings” (Scott, 2001, p. 57).

When specific patterns of thinking, talking and acting have become legitimate and taken-for-granted among management practitioners (Tolbert and Zucker, 1996; Westphal *et al.*, 1997; Dougherty and Heller, 1994; Heusinkveld and Reijers, 2009), they can play an important role in the way “new” issues are interpreted and enacted (Røvik, 1996; Zeitz *et al.*, 1999). This may imply that present organizations have assimilated and retained a range of different ideas and practices that have been implemented since their time of origin (Stinchcombe, 1965). As a consequence, the adoption of new ideas can, in the words of Berger and Luckmann, bestow “new meanings on the sedimented experiences of the collectivity” (Berger and Luckmann, 1967, p. 69).

Although sedimented elements are easily portrayed as homogeneous and uniform, various institutional theorists suggest that these may differ notably in their forms (Zeitz *et al.*, 1999; Hasselbladh and Kallinikos, 2000; Scott, 2001). In addition, it is suggested that these elements may not only persist and vary in their form, but ultimately differ in their possible evolution pattern in important ways. An institution’s basic social states may easily, as Hasselbladh and Kallinikos phrase it: “exist independently without being reduced to the others” (Hasselbladh and Kallinikos, 2000, p. 706). This would allow for the possibility to follow distinct trajectories, loosely coupled to the elements that they were initially associated with it. The variety in the forms and evolution of organizational practices is often related to the degree of formalization (see also Zeitz *et al.*, 1999; Zucker, 1988). This may entail that some of these sedimentations may be characterized as being latent, and informal (Zeitz *et al.*, 1999; Hasselbladh and Kallinikos, 2000). Others are regarded as more consciously, explicit or legally enforced such as in the form of formal techniques of control (see also: Berger and Luckmann, 1967; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Zeitz *et al.*, 1999; Scott, 2001). Theorist point to the fact that taken-for-granted elements also show differences in the extent and way these are talked about within an organization. In line with this, Berger and Luckmann stress the importance of language in institutional practices since it can be considered as a “depository of a large aggregate of collective sedimentations” (Berger and Luckmann, 1967, p. 69).

### **Data and method**

Our study was designed to explore how management practitioners make sense of management fashions as sedimented elements in their organization. This helps us to obtain a better and grounded understanding of the intra-organizational longevity of management fashions because we move beyond accounts that solely discuss an idea’s adoption and implementation process and it can help in understanding their future perceptions and actions (Kimberly and Bouchikhi, 1995). The study concentrates on the management practitioners’ framing of business process re-engineering (BPR) (Hammer and Champy, 1993) as sedimented fashion mainly because this management idea is regarded as a typical management fashion (Fincham, 1995; Carson *et al.*, 1999;

Heusinkveld and Benders, 2001; Benders and van Veen, 2001), not the least because it contains the typical elements of the rhetorical texture of fashion-setting texts (Jackson, 1996; Kieser, 1997).

*Research sites*

To find theoretically relevant informants, we sought to find reports of cases that were explicitly associated with BPR in the general managerial discourse (Furusten, 1999). These reports were used as starting points for collecting interview data (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p. 52). On the basis of these reports we interviewed 25 informants from different organizations (see Table I). The informants all were directly involved in the adoption and implementation of the idea, either as project manager, project facilitator, project officer or project administrator. We expected that this would yield a fertile ground for the discovery of relevant categories and their properties about how management practitioners make sense of sedimented fashions. In addition, although the study focuses on individual viewpoints, the organizations in which the informants were situated all had a reasonable size; we believed that this would generate a potential source for discovering a larger variety of sedimentation forms.

We sought to maximize the variation of the informants and their settings to increase the possibilities for further densification in the emergent themes and elements (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p. 62), or as Miles and Huberman put it: enhance the opportunities to generate “flesh on the bones of general constructs” (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 27; for recent examples of similar approaches see Boiral, 2003; Wright and Kitay, 2004; Golden and Geisler, 2007). This means that our sample included organizations from a variety of different fields, we ensured the selection included organizations that were at various stages after their BPR implementation, and we invited management practitioners with different functions (see Table I).

*Data collection*

After collecting and studying the implementation reports, we conducted semi-structured interviews. By referring to the reported BPR project in the interviews we ensured that the informants talked about concrete initiatives, thereby grounding their perceptions in actual experiences (Dougherty and Heller, 1994, p. 204). The interviews concentrated on the way managers frame fashions as sedimented within their organization, that is, at the time of the interview. Although each interview

Informant characteristics	Director and line management	Staff management	Internal consultants	Total (n = 25)
<i>Sector</i>				
Private	6	2	5	13
Public	1	10	1	12
<i>Organization size</i>				
100-1,000 employees	4	0	0	4
1,000-10,000 employees	2	9	6	17
> 10,000 employees	1	3	1	4
Total	7	12	6	

**Table I.**  
Overview of informants



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covered the same themes, the ongoing inclusion and comparison of new data revealed constant directions for additional research questions to ask in new interviews (Spradley, 1979, p. 92). The informants were interviewed on-site at their offices, which allowed them to support and illustrate their perceptions with documents and other artifacts. On average, the interviews lasted about 90 minutes. All interviews were recorded on minidisk, transcribed and sent back to each of these informants for verification or correction of the transcriptions.

### *Data analysis*

In our analysis of the data we followed a logic of constant comparison as proposed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and “rewritten” by Spradley (1979), Wester (1995), and Strauss and Corbin (1998). Our first step in exploring how management practitioners frame management fashions as sedimented elements within organizations involved comparing the data with the initial problem formulation of the research. In this exploration phase (Wester, 1995), we focused on the segments in which the management practitioners discussed the perceived current residues of BPR in their organization. We coded these segments to identify a universe of relevant terms related to sedimentation. In a second stage, we compared the preliminary terms with each other to further develop a consistent set of grounded categories and properties. We searched for similarities in the meaning of the preliminary terms, and explored how they differed (Spradley, 1979). To do this, we used simple data displays (Miles and Huberman, 1994), which helped in clustering the preliminary concepts that were related to the perceived residues of BPR. On the basis of these residues we systematically compared data to identify ways in which the informants framed their development trajectory.

A third activity entailed comparing our categories and properties, which emerged from the data with the relevant institutional literature. We did this not only to integrate and enrich the “native terms” with the available terms in the theory (Spradley, 1979), but also to refine and reduce our distinct concepts into an adequate structure and to further delimit the boundaries of the emergent framework (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). In the integration phase (Wester, 1995; Strauss and Corbin, 1998), we further developed a structure of key concepts around the core category of sedimentations. Finally, we compared the emerging theoretical framework with the data and sought to describe the main states of sedimentations as framed by the management practitioners and the central development trajectories. This was also a possibility of further saturating some thinner categories and properties, and finding quotes that illustrated these categories adequately.

We found that the perceptions of the management practitioners supported the argument that a management fashion as sedimented element is framed as comprising different forms that vary in their possible development trajectory. This allowed us to highlight important ways in which “old” ideas could shape future perceptions of management practitioners, and how these ideas, in turn, influenced the future functioning of organizations in a variety of different ways.

### **Findings: heterogeneous forms of sedimentations**

Our findings add support to the notion that management practitioners do not frame sediments of fashions as a homogeneous body nor do they interpret the language

associated with a fashion as necessarily transient within their organization. Rather, the management practitioners' framings indicate that sedimented fashions may comprise a variety of different forms. More specifically, the analysis revealed how the perceived sedimentations of management fashions are related to:

- organizational discourses;
- formal control systems; and
- ideologies (see Table II).

#### *Organizational discourses*

A first form of sedimentation that can be identified is related to the distinctive terminology and linguistic patterns that remain to be used in association with a management idea. Our analysis revealed that this form can be related to two distinct elements, that is:

- (1) latency of terms; and
- (2) loadedness of terms.

First, the informants in our study framed the latent presence of specific terms as an important sedimentation of a management idea. This entails that parts of an idea's linguistic package is understood as something that moved to the background and increasingly become associated with a specific period of time in the evolution of an organization. The interviewed management practitioners recognize that after a management idea has been adopted, some elements tend to be less intensively discussed after a while because these have been worn out as language of change, or have become translated into action. As a result, parts of the language in which management ideas are expressed is interpreted as a dormant part of the organization's vocabulary and as something that no longer requires much additional emphasis.

We no longer use the label BPR. I think that the term has become worn out. People heard it enough and know what it is I do not consider it as necessary to give the concept much attention per se. The importance is just generally recognized [no. 9].

Second, the interpretations of the interviewees indicate that a fashionable idea may also become associated with more overt linguistic sedimentations in organizations that receive permanence by its continued use. This entails that some terms are increasingly regarded as "common language" within an organizations and have become absorbed into an organization's standard vocabulary. As the management practitioners framed, these linguistic sedimentations signify that some ideas have obtained a positive connotation and have become generally accepted within a specific organization. Consider, for example, the comments of a staff member of a large hospital [D] who observes that after the BPR implementation, the label BPR remained as an enduring part of the organizational discourse:

BPR has become a key word in our organization. If people would like to do a large scale change in this organization than BPR would be considered THE method for that [no. 6].

The informants also recognize that some terms, initially associated with a specific idea, have obtained a negative connotation and become regarded as highly controversial. This entails that the adoption and realization of a management idea contaminates the



Interpreted forms	Key elements	Illustrative examples
<p><i>Organizational discourses (OD)</i> Sedimentations related to the organization's linguistic pattern used in association with a management fashion</p>	<p><i>Latency of terms</i> Parts of the linguistic package related to a management idea are discussed less and become associated with a specific period of time in the organization's history</p>	<p><i>Terms are worn out</i> "People on the shop floor will remember the BPR project still very well if you would ask them. However, the label will not be used actively in the organization. They consider BPR as a finished project which results in the fact that this terminology no longer has the same power in this organization" (no. 23)</p> <p><i>Terms have become translated in action</i> "Next to this, the term BPR grows blurred. Initially it is presented as BPR but eventually it becomes an organizational change, which means that people perceive it as a change in work practices and not as the concept BPR. The term BPR is hardly used any longer; people now experience how it is to work in teams and feel the difference between processes oriented work and functional oriented work" (no. 7)</p> <p><i>Terms are accepted as "normal language"</i> "The concept is just common sense in the organization which means that "processes" is key to everything we do, this is no longer questioned. Every manager talks about "processes" and recognizes their importance so the awareness on this issue has grown considerably." (no. 9)</p> <p><i>Terms are regarded as controversial</i> "That dissent was expressed in real fights with the works council and resulted in an overstrained situation on the shop floor [...] Because of this, the term BPR is taboo in this organization. Organizational members got a large hang-over from the implementation of this project" (no. 1)</p> <p><i>Changes in working procedures</i> "During the project a number of things have changed which resulted in completely new multidisciplinary surgery for this specific category of patients. So in view of this concept a number of organization changes have been realized: work processes have become different and routes have changed" (no. 6). "These concepts have been firmly rooted by making agreements with the people involved and formally record these" (no. 6)</p>
<p><i>Control systems (CS)</i> Sedimentations related to the adapted control techniques induced or associated with the implementation of a management fashion</p>	<p><i>Loadedness of terms</i> Parts of the linguistic package related to a management idea have obtained an organization-specific connotation</p>	
	<p><i>Structural arrangements</i> Adapted formal work routines that may become manifest in changed working procedures, control structure, or management systems</p>	

**Table II.**  
Coding scheme and  
typology of framed  
sedimentations

(continued)

Interpreted forms	Key elements	Illustrative examples
<p><i>Ideologies (ID)</i> Sedimentations that are linked to the norms and values that have been obtained in relation to a management fashion</p>	<p><i>Methodical approaches</i> Recognizable and structured ways of approaching organizational change in response of specific organizational problems that may be retained in a more or less formalized way</p> <p><i>Cognitive representations</i> A specific "mindset" established among the organizational members that may enhance organizational problem recognition</p>	<p><i>Changes in control structures</i> "So the structural intervention, the reorganization of [organization P] from the five sectors model into the three divisions model, has been realized and has become entrenched. As a result, I became responsible for one division employing 300 people. However, although the general market model and division structure endured, and people would still relate this to BPR, it has been changed somewhat because of the subsequent merger" (no. 21)</p> <p><i>Method-as-practice</i> "People here know that they have to perform projects according to the structured BPR method and not on an ad hoc way as they used to do. Indeed, sometimes you don't follow each step or take specific phases together. Also some step are performed more implicitly. In this organization we still work in the large projects according to the BPR method, I cannot imagine that this suddenly will be abandoned" (no. 12)</p> <p><i>Formal change approaches</i> "The concept has become part of the strategic policy plan where BPR is called a method for redesign of healthcare processes" (no. 5)</p> <p><i>Normative principles</i> "Within this organization, the BPR framework has been used in the same extent as a couple of years ago. In the past people were mainly focused on their own organizational department but by BPR they have obtained a much broader horizon which develops every day again and initiates various new changes. It encourages a perspective for the people to understand the entire process and readily recognize new changes" (no. 11)</p> <p><i>Education</i> "Every unit leader, cluster manager, and specialist manager will follow a management development course that consists of sixty days a year. The entire BPR story is now included in it. So BPR has become a part of the organization's education program. As a result, everybody wanted to do BPR projects and asked me if this would be possible" (no. 5)</p>

(continued)

Interpreted forms	Key elements	Illustrative examples
	<p><i>Experiential traces</i> Accumulated learning from enactments in relation to a specific management idea or changes in the network of work relationships that may facilitate or obstruct future actions</p>	<p><i>Individual reflective outcomes</i> “Because of the experiences that I acquired during this BPR project, it would cost me less effort when I would do a similar trajectory again because I gained better insight into the pitfalls that are unavoidably on the way” (no. 23)</p> <p><i>Organizational competences</i> “The concept [BPR] has become, as we dub, a ‘competence’ so we have to continuously work on building and preserving it. Because of this, we have now a Process specialism in our organization. All the managers know that they cannot neglect this because they have to apply this to their department and we offer a skilled process architect. We put a lot of effort in maintaining the methods to manage and further develop the process competence” (no. 9)</p> <p><i>Networked reputation</i> “Although the [BPR] concept did not bring the desired result in both projects, it caused that those people find each other more easily. In another context they will probably talk to each other more quickly because they know each other and understand how one thinks about specific matters” (no. 20)</p>

Table II.

linguistic package associated with that idea, thereby creating a context-specific over-sensitivity to particular terms. The association with heavy difficulties, conflicts or practical concerns undermines the idea's initial attractiveness and unavoidably affects the way an idea is talked about in an organization. As a result, management practitioners may experience that they can no longer use the language in the organization as it may hamper future change initiatives. For instance, as a result of a failed implementation of a BPR program, the term became highly controversial in that specific organization:

So organizational member have become a bit reserved using the label BPR because it is associated with something that is complicated and takes a long time before you see any results. This is because the realization of the BPR project took too long and a lot of problems emerged during this process. As a result, BPR is discussed in a negative way in the organization because people do not directly see the improvements and the Knee clinic does no longer exist [no. 17].

#### *Control systems*

A second sedimented form of management fashions that was found in the data relates to formal systems of control. Our findings reveal that, in relation to this state, the interviewed management practitioners framed sedimentations of a management idea in association with at least two important elements:

- (1) structural changes; and
- (2) methodical approaches.

First, the interviewees consider the formal changes in organizational structures to be an important and highly visible state of sedimentation of a management idea. They indicate that these sedimentations become manifest in formalized adaptations of working procedures, distribution of tasks, and in the establishment of new management systems. Soon after their realization, these changes associated with an idea, may become regarded as sedimented by management practitioners. In addition, the formalization of these sedimentations is considered to enhance an ongoing recognition of the practices as being legitimate thereby creating an enabling environment for an idea's continued initiation and usage in organizations.

The Diabetic foot clinic has been implemented and still performs very well. There are a lot of patients and the evaluations show that everybody was enthusiastic about this new way of organizing cure and the way different disciplines are coordinated [no. 18].

Second, our findings indicate that sedimentations related to formal control systems are not only interpreted as structural changes, but are also related to specific methodical ways of performing organization change. This means that people may retain certain systematic and shared ways of approaching change initiatives in response to specific organization problems. These approaches may be retained in a formalized form and codified in documents, manuals, and written down in tools and techniques. Such methodical or procedural sedimentations can also be preserved because they are considered as "normal", every day change practice which enhances an organization's ability to remember, recognize and activate these in new settings.

In particular the person who was involved in the BPR project suggested applying the concept in a new project. [...] That person noticed that in organizational changes you should preferably follow a specific systematic approach, recognizes this in a new project and keeps other project members to it [no. 6].

### *Ideologies*

Our findings indicate that ideologies are framed by the informants as a third, and important state of sedimentation of management ideas. This state is perceived to stem from the continued recognition and use of the normative principles that have been obtained in relation to a management idea and is associated with two important elements:

- (1) cognitive representation; and
- (2) experiential traces.

First, the informants noted the establishment of a specific “mindset” among management practitioners that is induced by the idea’s implementation. These management practitioners understood that, rather than bringing about organizational changes, such a mindset contributed to an enhanced conceptual apparatus that has resided in the memory of people. Maintaining such cognitive representations among organization members is interpreted as a foundation for an enhanced understanding of organizational problems but is also related to a future readiness in the recognition and reception of new ideas and initiatives:

So the BPR project has created awareness among the people involved about the added value of their work activities. The project did not so much resulted in the implementation of procedures but rather in people using this awareness in their daily work [no. 14].

Experiential traces represent a second important element that is constructed in relation to ideological sedimentations. This is framed as the accumulated experiences that are generated during the realization of a management idea. The findings reveal that these experiences are understood as elements shaping the management practitioners’ cognitive models and eventually affect the way people approach future change processes. For instance various interpersonal experiences are considered to enhance the crystallization of an informal and active network, which facilitates or inhibit future communication and coordination within the organization. Because of these experiences, people feel that they are better able to circumvent making basic mistakes in new instances:

If someone would like to do a BPR project, I always consider very carefully whether it fits that department and whether the people that come here are going to misuse the concept to solve figurative problems. That knowledge is fed by the experiences one obtains with the concept throughout the years [no. 6].

### **Findings: parallel and dispersed trajectories of sedimentations**

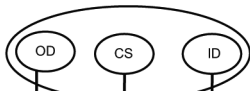
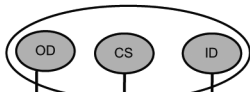
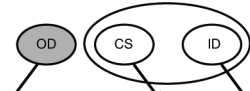

Above, we identified different forms of perceived sedimentations. The second stage of our analysis explored how management practitioners frame similarities and differences in the evolution patterns of these sedimentations. The informants’ interpretations indicated that different possible sedimentations do not necessarily

follow a uniform evolution pattern, but may also evolve in divergent ways. As a result, the evolution patterns of a fashion's sedimentations are framed by management practitioners as parallel or dispersed trajectories (see Figure 1). This adds support to the importance of developing a more fine-grained understanding of the possible long-term intra-organizational impact of management fashions.

*Parallel trajectories*

We found that different organizational sedimentations that were originally associated with a popular management idea are framed to follow similar evolution patterns. This may comprise that management practitioners understand the routes of discourses as something that remain associated with the trajectories of the control mechanisms and ideologies that were initially induced by an idea. Specifically, these trajectories may either be associated with more manifest or more latent evolution patterns.

First, our analysis reveals the possibility that a continued manifestation of discourses associated with a management idea is perceived to parallel an enduring manifestation of specific control systems and ideologies. In particular, an increased

Interpreted trajectories		Illustrative examples
Parallel		<i>Continued manifestation of OD associated with continued recognition of CS and ID</i> 'We were able to do a lot of new BPR projects. This was mainly because our Board of Governors decided to keep BPR in the organization and not to introduce any other concepts and methods. Because of this, the concept has become generally accepted. [...] Next to this, the Board of Governors also propagates the concept by means of their formal policies. In negotiations with specialists and insurance companies they maintain that in this organization BPR is continued to be used.' [#6]
		<i>Latency in OD associated with a dormant state of CS and ID</i> 'At the start, BPR was number one on the agenda of the Board of Directors, but in the course of time, BPR dropped in priority. After a while it did not appear on the Board's agenda and was no longer talked about. So at a certain moment BPR did no longer get the highest priority from the top management, while at the outset all energy had to be spent into the concept because they really had to have it. If a company is confronted with a merger, many other issues will emerge what makes that the attention for a concept such as BPR unavoidably moves to the background.' [#7]
Dispersed		<i>Relabeling: Changes in OD not associated with changes in CS and ID</i> - OD vs CS: 'During the BPR project we took the front office tasks from every department because each of the three-hundred pension team could answer the phone for any question of a client. These people are all in the back office now and are no longer allowed to take up the phone. The front office has been realized even though the BPR project has been officially terminated after a while. At this moment we are at the department Consultancy and Market Communication. The formal establishment of this department is the physical proof of the success of the BPR approach.' [#1] - OD vs ID: 'I was educated in BPR and did projects with it when suddenly from the field of Healthcare the concept of "Clinical Pathways" emerged. At first, the label did not say me anything but after someone had given a presentation about it I recognized it directly because concerning the ideas it was exactly the same as BPR.' [#16]
		<i>Refilling: Changes in CS not associated with changes in OD and ID</i> - CS vs OD: 'It has been kept alive because the Board of Directors expressed the new ICT system in the light of BPR. So gradually different things were taken up and placed under the header of BPR. [...] Also everything that took place in relation to the merger though it had nothing to do with the initial BPR project, was put under the same denominator. The BPR project is not necessarily regarded as a success, but the label is now more a legitimization of different steps that are formally associated with it. So even after the completion of the BPR project the label has been formally used in this organization such as in the construction of a new information system.' [#21] - CS vs ID: 'So the realization if BPR has been considered as a success and that was clearly communicated. However, other people within the organization did not follow this successful example very much because of different reasons. Some of the new management team members did not experience the BPR project, a number of other issues required a lot of time from the people, and the culture has changed and values more short-term results instead of investing in a long-term BPR trajectory.' [#17]

**Figure 1.**  
Coding scheme and typology of framed evolution trajectories associated with sedimentations



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formalization and routinization of these discourses is considered to enhance an ongoing recognition of specific sedimented control systems and ideologies as accepted solutions to address new problem situations. For instance, as noted by one staff member, the entrenchment of an idea's discourse as part of an organization's formal languages is related to the continued recognition of other sedimentations:

The concept has been incorporated as important method in the corporate policy. Personally, I'll continue drawing on the experiences of the redesign process and because the initial project has become a success, the label is still used within the organization. The organizational change that has been realized still persists [no. 5].

Second, our findings identify a possibility in which people in organizations interpret a latency of an idea's discourses in relation to the dormancy of other sedimentations. A decrease in the attention of discourses associated with an idea is related to a dormant state of the control systems and ideologies that were initially related to it. The informants specify various elements such as a turnover in staff, a lack of satisfying results or a change in priority status as important elements in the latency of specific discourses, which may ultimately hamper the manifestation of related discourses and ideologies. This may pave the way for the introduction of new initiatives. However, as one informant explicated, these new initiatives do not automatically build on previous experiences:

[After BPR] The Balanced scorecard was considered as something new, while it was in fact a possibility to realize parts of the old BPR. [...] at the same time it is not the case that the experience curve has been increased by BPR because people have learned about how processes work and how you can change them [no. 23].

### *Dispersed trajectories*

Our findings reveal that the sedimentations are also framed to vary significantly in their possible evolution patterns. These perceived dispersed trajectories are constructed as:

- using new discourses while maintaining the control systems and ideologies; or
- changing the control systems while preserving "old" discourses and ideologies.

First, the informants perceived that changes in the discourses are not necessarily paralleled by changes in the control mechanisms and ideologies that were initially associated with a management idea. Rather, they specify how new discourses are used to increase the receptiveness in organizations to "old" sedimentations and provides an important opportunity for re-use. This makes clear that, even after some time, previous experiences can be recognized as a relevant solution, but are "re-labeled" and become associated with new discourses. For instance, a new discourse contributes to maintaining legitimacy for specific methodical ways to guide organizational change trajectories. As another example, one of the informants mentioned that new discourses even allowed "old" control mechanisms to become realized in spite of unfavorable associations. He emphasized that within his organization, parts of "old" structural changes were used in new change initiatives and became known under a different label.

The current turnaround is typically BPR and realized in the spirit of BPR, only five years later. In this way we have a successful project but not under the same label [no. 1].

Second, our data analysis revealed that changes in control systems that were induced by a new management idea are not automatically perceived to co-evolve with the developments in discourse and ideology initially associated with the same idea. Rather, the informants specify that similar discourses and ideologies may be used while formal control systems may be significantly adapted. This may imply that the discourses and ideologies introduced in association with an idea may persist but are “refilled” with different control systems. For example, one informant noted that in his hospital, the discourses and ideology of BPR had obtained a positive connotation, and, as a result, initially unrelated structural changes have become associated with it. Initially unrelated developments may be placed under the heading of old discourses to enhance their legitimacy:

Everyone in the organization knows what BPR is and uses it. There is no specialist in this hospital who says that we won't be doing a BPR project any more, but meanwhile they started to call everything BPR. Indeed, people may use the concept opportunistically but I don't care as long as it leads to quality improvements [no. 5].

### **Discussion and conclusions**

Theorists of management fashion have provided important insights into the field-level dissemination and evolution of popular management ideas (e.g. Carson *et al.*, 1999; Benders and van Bijsterveld, 2000; Heusinkveld and Benders, 2001; Giroux, 2006; Braam *et al.*, 2007). There is an emerging stream of research that suggests that organizations may keep using the practices associated with a fashionable management idea even though its language may no longer be in vogue. These theorists have also revealed important factors that may inhibit or enhance the long-term impact of fashions. However, until now, little organization-level research has been devoted to how these long-term effects of management fashions in organizations are made sense of beyond the assumed transience of a fashion's discourse and persistence of their practices. Drawing on an institutional perspective, this study explored how management practitioners make sense of management fashions as sedimented elements within organizations. Our analysis reveals that sedimented fashions within organizations are framed as comprising different forms that are systematically associated with divergent evolution patterns. This allowed developing a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the evolution of popular management ideas in organizational practice, which opens fruitful new research directions.

#### *Theoretical implications*

Our findings contribute to the present management fashion literature in two important ways. First, we extend the current literature on management fashion by showing how, unlike present conceptualizations, the long-term impact of fashionable ideas in organizations cannot be considered a single entity with a uniform pattern of development. Rather, this study identifies important variations in these sedimentations, which constitutes a basis for possible different evolution patterns. A finding that adds to our current understanding of management fashions is that the interpreted sedimentations of a fashionable management idea vary significantly in their form. By identifying different forms of sedimentations, this study indicates the importance of a more fine-grained understanding of a fashion's entrenchment in

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organizations. This may imply that a fashion's possible intra-organizational longevity cannot be regarded as a single entity with a uniform pattern of development but should be understood in terms of a diversity of related trajectories. Thus further specifying the way in which different sedimentations may take shape and evolve can significantly enhance understanding of the evolution of fashionable ideas in practice and contribute to an advanced conceptualization of the consumption of management ideas. This would imply that future intra-organizational analyses of the evolution of fashionable ideas should not only account for different forces that may enhance or inhibit institutionalization of ideas, but also account for a constellation of different context-specific sedimentations, each with its own possible development route.

Second, beyond developing a more heterogeneous conceptualization of sedimented management fashions, this study allows to develop a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the possible co-evolution between the fashion's discourse and the organizational practices associated with this discourse. Whilst some theorists suggest that a decrease in the general discourse on a specific fashion co-evolves with the evolution of this fashionable idea in organizational practice (Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999), others emphasize that the underlying practices may remain despite of a significant decrease in the use of an idea's language/terminology (Nijholt and Benders, 2007). This study, however, showed that not only a management fashion's practices may become sedimented, but also parts of a fashion's "linguistic package" may become common language and included in an organization's everyday or latent vocabulary. This is in line with Sturdy and Fleming's (2003) work that considers talk both as a cause and a manifestation of an idea's implementation. Our study moves this further by indicating that the language of allegedly transient ideas may remain in an organization and play an important conditional role in future change initiatives, an issue that received scant attention in the present discussions about co-evolution in management fashion. The results revealed that that elements of a fashion's initial linguistic package can be assimilated into the organization's language system, in spite of the fact that the initial concept may no longer be in vogue. In addition, the study also indicated that the implementation of a fashion may cause that organizations develop a persistent over-sensitivity, or allergy to the use of specific language and become permanently immune for specific solutions. This points to the possibility that management practitioners had to avoid using specific words related to a former fashion as it may constitute a barrier to the acceptance of new change initiatives. This suggests that sedimented fashions may play a notable part in the evolution of organizations (Stinchcombe, 1965) as they can be retained and have important long-term consequences for the future functioning of an organization. As a result we extend studies of management fashion by showing how a fashion's "linguistic package" may be considered both restrictive and encouraging to future organizational behavior.

#### *Limitations and further research directions*

The framework presented in this article not only provides more insight into the possible enduring effects of management fashions within organizations, but also signifies the importance of more systematic research on the evolution of management ideas in organizational practice. Notwithstanding the benefits of our approach compared to studying the use of popular labels in the print media or the adoption of

these labels by a population of organizations, this approach also has some limitations. It has not been our aim to study actual organizational practices, nor do we seek to make claims about the preceding implementation trajectory of a fashion. Rather this study focuses on better understanding individual viewpoints of management practitioners in how they make sense of fashions as sedimented elements in organizations.

These limitations indicate that tracing the intra-organizational evolution of management ideas remains largely unexplored and a complex endeavor (Watson, 1986; Miller *et al.*, 1997), and our study can be considered an important step into this area. Knowledge about the way management ideas evolve can be enriched by drawing on multiple methods of research. Longitudinal case studies (e.g. Fincham and Roslender, 2004) and surveys, but also ethnographic approaches (e.g. Spradley, 1979) are still under-utilized in this field, but can, in addition to present research approaches, provide valuable clues both for the important but under-researched questions such as the changing long-term cognitive and behavioral impact of management ideas in organizational practice.

On the basis of our findings, various fruitful areas for future research can be distinguished that may concentrate on studying the routes of different forms of sedimentations within organizations. We believe that gaining a better insight into sedimentation of management fashions implies that an idea's evolution should not be regarded as a single route leading to either abandonment or institutionalization but as being more heterogeneous and open-ended. This conceptualization allows raising important questions such as: Why are some sedimentations of fashions re-used in an organization, while others become more latent or even forgotten? Under what conditions do organizations maintain different sedimentations, reinvigorate "old" ideas or reinvent wheels (Lammers, 1988)? How are some sedimentations able to gain continuous legitimacy over time while others are repeatedly reinvented? How can "old" sedimentations that moved through a period of closure (Bijker, 1990) become part of a new configuration of ideas and practices? We believe these remain significant questions in future studies on the evolution of fashionable management ideas.

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**Further reading**

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