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**Translating Leadership: Tensions, Contradictions, and Ambiguities**

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# Identities in flex: How management consultants construct their identity in and as part of processes of translation

**Keywords:** translation, management consultants, identity work

## Introduction

There is broad agreement that management consultants hold important roles in bridging management theory and practice (O'Mahoney, Heusinkveld & Wright, 2013; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2001). Indeed, a central task of management consultancy is to package and present

management models and concepts so that business leaders can grasp their meaning and recognize their relevance for practice (Kieser & Leiner, 2009). Therefore, the ways in which consultants commodify and translate academic management knowledge into practice have stimulated interest among organizational scholars (e.g., Gill et al., 2020; Heusinkveld, 2014; Heusinkveld & Benders, 2005; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2001). Yet, little research has been devoted to study the underlying motivations driving such translation work.

Prior research points to the different roles that consultants inhabit in the translation of academic management knowledge (Bouwmeester, Heusinkveld & Tjemkes, 2022). One stream of research depicts management consultants as vehicles that carry theoretical concepts from academia into practice (Sahlin-Andersson & Engwall, 2002). Another stream construes the consultant as an innovator. The consultant combines and makes sense of existing expert knowledge, which brings new interpretations of the knowledge into play (Ernst & Keiser, 2002). A third stream of research casts the consultant as a legitimator of organizational action. This view implies that the role of consultants is largely ceremonial and consists in providing their clients with new practices or discourses of management (Kostova & Roth, 2002) through emotional storytelling (Berglund & Werr, 2000). This research recognizes that management consultants use organizational and management theory to legitimate their actions (Elmholdt, 2016). Yet, it neglects other roles that academic knowledge may play in the work of consultants. Current literature therefore does not shed sufficient light on the underlying motivation behind the various translation roles.

Whereas previous studies identify various approaches to how management consultants engage in acts of translation (Gill et al., 2020) and knowledge commodification (Heusinkveld & Benders, 2005), they remain vague as to how and why consultants use academic knowledge in their work and the tensions they might experience when doing so. While extant research has emphasized how identification with a concept shapes the way it is translated (van Grinsven, Sturdy & Heusinkveld, 2020) we lack empirical studies of how consultants translate academic knowledge and the underlying motivations driving this process. Stressing the agency of translation (Zilber, 2006) this paper investigates the tensions consultants experience when translating academic management knowledge into practical advice. More specifically, we explore how management consultants engage in 'identity work' (Brown, 2015) to tackle the tensions they experience when translating academic knowledge into practice. Extending prior research on the role of identity work in processes of translation (van Grinsven et al., 2020), we

ask the following question: How do management consultants construct themselves in and as part of processes of translation?

To answer this question, the paper draws on a qualitative study which explores how management consultants engage in identity work during acts of translation. More specifically, we study how management consultants construct themselves by mobilizing and juggling different identities as they translate academic concepts into practical advice.

We find that consultants experience tensions as they try to translate academic knowledge into practical advice. In response to such tensions, consultants mobilize three different identities which they maneuver between: the identity of 'the expert', 'the problem-solver', and 'the mediator'. Our preliminary findings show how the mobilization of different identities allow consultants to simplify academic knowledge while keeping their professional integrity as theoretical experts. As such, the find that identity work, expressed through the flexible juggling of different identities, support processes of translation.

**Theoretical framing**

Institutional scholars have long been interested in how ideas, concepts and management knowledge circulate through acts and processes of translation (Czarniawska & Sevón, 2005). Such processes involve interpretation whereby organizational actors make sense of unfamiliar ideas as they travel (Sahlin-Andersson & Engwall, 2002). Moreover, theory suggests that organizational actors carry these unfamiliar ideas with them into new social settings, in which ideas and concepts are translated into new organizational practices, tools, policies, structures, or other material expressions (Boxenbaum & Strandgaard Pedersen, 2009). Translation, thus, also involves a sense-giving process in that it extends sense-making into the realm of organizational practice. This process entails that organizational actors retain a level of agency (Zilber, 2006) in shaping the broader understanding of an unfamiliar idea (Boxenbaum & Battilana, 2005; Røvik, 2016). Research has, for instance, shown how actors' level of identification with a concept will influence how they translate it (van Grinsven et al., 2020). Yet, further research is needed to explore the role of agency in translation, particularly in relation to identity work.

As management consultants represent important carriers of academic concepts when theory travels from academia to practice (Sahlin-Andersson & Engwall, 2002), translation scholars have previously devoted time and efforts to study the work of management consultants

(Heusinkveld & Visscher, 2012). These types of organizational actors are known to combine and make sense of existing expert knowledge, which in turn allows for new interpretations of the knowledge in play (Ernst & Keiser, 2002). It is the task of consultants to provide their clients with new knowledge, to shed new light on current challenges, or to provide solutions to problems (Armbrüster & Kipping, 2002). Moreover, an important aspect of management consultants' work is the packaging of consultancy products that draw on academic knowledge. Packaging refers to the "rendering of ideas into understandable and compelling formats" (Jha & Jacob, 2020, p. 156), meaning that consultants package and present theoretical models and ideas in such a way that practitioners can grasp their meaning and recognize their relevance for practice (Kieser & Leiner, 2009). They contextualize and adapt theoretical models to the everyday practices of their clients, paying attention to factors "such as time pressure, uncertainty, and complexity" (Worren, Moore & Elliott, 2002, p. 1231). These studies highlight how management consultants, when translating academic knowledge into organizational practice, must grapple with the tension of simplifying the complex (Røvik, 2016). From this perspective, consultants act as standardizers of organizational practice (Gill et al., 2020) by reducing complexity and selling perceived safety in neatly packaged, unequivocal 'best practices' (Clegg, Kornberger & Rhodes, 2004) and standardized solutions (Wright, Sturdy & Wylie, 2012).

Recent scholarship on translation has stressed the need to consider how translating actors shape processes of translation (Zilber, 2006; Gondo & Amis, 2013). In studying how consultants translate theory to practice, there is thus a need to explore how management consultants construct themselves within and through processes of translation. This means exploring why and how they engage with academic knowledge and what potential tensions they experience in this process.

**The empirical setting and study**

The study is part of a wider research project that investigates how academic knowledge is translated into practice. Data collection for the present study was initiated in fall 2021 and is still ongoing. It is a qualitative case study that examines how consultants translate academic knowledge into practical advice.

We selected five Danish management consultancies for the present study. The consultancies were selected based on their claims of being research based, meaning that they made public claims of drawing on research in their service offer. To fit the wider research project, we only

selected consultancies for inclusion in this study if their service offer drew on theoretical concepts from management and organizational research. The cases were thus selected to correspond to the principles of assumed information value (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

To recruit relevant cases, we conducted informal case recruitment interviews with each identified consultancy. We interviewed two representatives of each consultancy, typically the partners. During these informal interviews, we explained our research interest in how academic knowledge is translated into practice and inquired into the organization and the theoretical foundation guiding their research-based consultancy services. These conversations took place either on Teams or in person at the premises of the authors' research institution and aimed essentially at confirming that the cases were in fact research-based consultancies that draw on theoretical concepts from organization and management theory in their service offer.

We collected data in the form of interviews, archival data, and observational material. We formally interviewed both partners and consultants in each organization in collaboration with a third team member. The interviews were semi-structured in the sense that we had prepared a set list of questions to ask all our informants, which we adjusted in real time in response to how the interview developed. We inquired into the role that organization and management theory play in their work, what theories and concepts they found particularly inspiring or useful, and how they communicated and made use of such concepts. The present paper draws on 15 semi-structured interviews with eleven management consultants. All interviews were conducted in English and were either video- or audio recorded.

**Preliminary findings**

Our preliminary findings indicate that management consultants mobilize and move between different identities as they translate academic knowledge into consultancy advice. We identify three identities that enable such translations: the identity of 'the expert', 'the problem-solver', and 'the mediator'. When evoking the 'the expert' identity, consultants express a strong commitment towards doing justice to the academic knowledge they convey. This aspirational identity provides the consultant with a sense of integrity and pride. It is moreover important when signaling academic expertise to clients. In contrast, the identity of 'the problem-solver' reduces academic knowledge to mere signaling value and works to simplify and translate academic knowledge into actionable solutions. Finally, the third identity of 'the mediator' is expressed as an intermediary, pragmatic identity. When mobilizing this pragmatic identity, the

consultants emphasize the importance of facilitating a link between academic knowledge and practice.

We identified aspect as of all three identities across our sample of informants yet noted how some identities were more prominent for the some of the consultants. Moreover, consultants stressed how they mobilize different identifies at different stages of the consulting process. By flexibly moving between different identities, consultants alter between 'flexing' deep academic knowledge and offering simplified, actionable advice. Our preliminary findings therefore show how the mobilization of different identities allows consultants to simplify academic knowledge while retaining their professional integrity as theoretical experts. As such, we find that management consultants construct themselves within and through processes of translation by mobilizing different identifies. By doing so, they maintain professional integrity while also adapting to (perceived) client demands.

The findings of the paper show how consultants engage in identity work when experiencing pressure to reduce the complexity and contextuality of academic research and concepts. More specifically, the findings portray how consultants, as they translate academic knowledge to client advice, mobilize different identities to strike a balance between complexity and simplification when translating academic concepts. While academic concepts provide consultants with the clout and legitimacy as organizational experts, they remain keenly aware of the need to keep their message simple and digestible. These pressures run the risk of reducing the translated academic concepts to empty shells of mere signalling value. To manoeuvre these tensions between different demands, consultant mobilize different identities that allow them to please clients while upholding internal consistency and integrity.

**Discussion of preliminary findings**

Our study aims to extend scholarship on translation-as-identify-work (van Grinsven et al., 2020) by exploring how consultants mobilize different identities during processes of translation. While van Grinsven et al., (2020) showed how individual identification with a concept were stable, we find that individual consultants remain flexible in their identification and translation of academic knowledge. More specifically, our study explicates how mobilizing different identities allow consultant to stray from the original complexity and situatedness of academic knowledge, while still upholding their integrity and self-perception as theoretical

experts. As such, we show how translating agents affect and are affected by processes of translation.

Finally, research has outlined the different roles that management consultants inhabit in the translation of academic management knowledge (Bouwmeester et al., 2022; Elmholdt, 2016). Our study indicate that consultants do not merely inhabit different roles but may also invoke different identities to cope with the tensions and complexities of consultant work. In doing so, we explore some of the possibilities and limits to actors' agency in processes of translation.

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