The Adoption of Management Ideas and Practices
Theoretical Perspectives and Possibilities

Abstract The adoption of new management ideas and practices has become an important and substantial area of study and debate within organizational studies, often under the label of management fads. However, there has been little critical reflection on the range of theoretical approaches used and their problems and possibilities. Moreover, while there has been some overlap with broader issues of management knowledge and learning, debates and literatures remain largely distinct. By way of an overview and as a way of furthering the existing multi-disciplinarity of debates on learning, this article selectively constructs and assesses six broad perspectives on the adoption of management ideas. Rational views are initially contrasted with various psychodynamic, dramaturgical, political, cultural and institutional approaches. However, it is argued that existing perspectives and classifications tend to be dualistic and either idealize or marginalize managerial rationality. This leads to empirical neglect and the possibility for approaches where rational management is acknowledged as necessarily bounded and emotional. Key Words: emotion; fads; knowledge diffusion; rationality; theory; translation

With the increased profile and the proliferation of management ideas, it is now commonplace to hear both respectful and sceptical discussions of the latest ‘fads and fashions’. More specifically, debates continue in both media and academic circles as to the value and attraction of seemingly new ideas and of their promoters such as management gurus, consultants and academics (e.g. Abrahamson and Eisenman, 2001). Indeed, such concerns have been given added impetus by the rediscovery of the competitive value of managing knowledge and learning (e.g. see Eisenhardt and Santos, 2002). A whole host of studies have emerged exploring how and why ideas and practices are adopted by organizations and to what extent these processes are concerned with improving organizational performance. However, in focusing on these issues and, perhaps, because of the relative novelty of the subject in the context of management, little attention has been paid to the various theoretical positions, problems and possibilities evident in this literature (see Abrahamson, 1996; Grint, 1997; Thomas, 2003).
This neglect might seem surprising as there is a long tradition of studying the creation, diffusion, application, adaptation, abandonment and rejection of ideas and practices. In particular, the related, but distinct, fields of innovation (e.g. see Rogers, 1995; Tidd, 2001) and, of course, learning (e.g. Dierkes et al., 2001; Nonaka and Nishiguchi, 2001) demonstrate influences from a very wide range of disciplines (see also Fox, 1994a, b). These traditions and influences still have much to offer the emergent field of ‘management ideas’. Indeed, we shall see how there are some areas of overlap, in relation to the embeddedness of knowledge for example. However, the reverse also holds. In particular, until recently, the field of management learning has not fully engaged with the literature on the adoption of management ideas (see Giroux and Taylor, 2002; Antal and Krebsbach-Gnath, 2001). This relatively new area may then be naïve in certain respects, re-inventing the wheels of innovation and learning, but collectively it may also offer insights from other theoretical traditions, especially developments in social theory and organizational studies. It is hoped that this article will go some way in doing this by outlining, evaluating and developing the main theoretical perspectives used to explain why management ideas and practices are adopted. Also, tensions and possibilities for integration and multiple approaches to research are explored, especially by drawing on recent critiques of managerial rationality.

First, it is important to clarify the particular approach and focus adopted here. Attention will be directed to what might be considered as contextual or motivational dimensions of learning processes. In addition, the focus is on the adoption of ideas and practices rather than the broader term of knowledge. The latter is notoriously difficult to pin down and encompasses much more than the explicit or embrained and encoded forms which are the main concern here (see e.g. Blackler, 1995). However, conceptual difficulties remain. For example, there is a long tradition of study and reflection regarding the relationship between ideas and practices, words and deeds, mind and body, some of which shows that ideas (and words) can be seen as not simply representing, facilitating or informing practices, but constituting them (e.g. Gronn, 1983). Nevertheless and more generally, the distinction retains some value (e.g. Argyris and Schon, 1974; Sturdy and Fleming, 2003) and is a key theme in some of the literature (e.g. Kostova and Roth, 2002). For example, within most management disciplines, there is a concern to identify whether a particular approach (e.g. empowerment, market segmentation) has really been implemented or whether firms are engaging in ‘mere’ rhetoric (e.g. Appelbaum and Batt, 1994). Although such studies pose new problems, such as developing appropriate methodologies to identify ‘real’ implementation and neglecting ways in which practices are transformed, they provide an important empirical contribution.

Constructing and reviewing a field of literature and boundaries within it involves choices and assumptions about what is important. Despite the appearance and rhetoric of objectivity, for example, this article is based on a broadly sociological and academic view of the world—management learning as a ‘kind of sociology of management knowledge’ (Fox, 1994b: 586). It is a form of ordering and privileging which is necessarily limiting and silencing as well as, hopefully, productive and insightful. Indeed, the article proceeds by building up and then breaking down divisions with this in mind. One ordering option was to explore common empirical themes. The transience (or longevity) of ideas, for instance, can be explored at different levels of analysis—from the individual manager and idea
to the economic and social system (e.g. Huczynski, 1993). Others examine particular diffusion channels such as gurus (Jackson, 2001), consultancy (Clark, 1995) books and newspapers (Furusten, 1999; Mazza and Alvarez, 2000), business schools and universities (Sturdy and Gabriel, 2000), multinational companies (Kostova and Roth, 2002), joint ventures (Child and Rodrigues, 1996), nongovernmental organizations (Bierstecker, 1995) or professional associations (Robertson et al., 1996). Similarly, different ideas and practices are examined (see Collins, 2000) such as BPR (Grint, 1994), entrepreneurialism (Alvarez, 1996), ‘green’ management (Fineman, 2001) or in terms of groups of fads and innovations (Carson et al., 2000). These may inform a concern with processes such as the hybridization of ideas (Botti, 1998), Japanization (Lillrank, 1995), Americanization (Djelic, 1998), globalization (Smith and Meiksins, 1995) or neo-imperialism (Chanlat, 1996) or inform prescriptions for adoption (Gibson and Tesone, 2001).

Such an empirical approach, however, would not readily address the general failure in this literature to reflect on underlying assumptions and alternative ways of understanding. Theory is either hidden, partial or partisan, with little recognition of analytical strengths and weaknesses, and therefore limited scope for theoretical development. Organizing the field according to broad theoretical perspectives, however, poses its own particular problems. First, and as already intimated, the boundaries of a field are highly permeable. Second, the allocation of labels is somewhat arbitrary. It may draw attention to core assumptions and problematics, but also combine approaches with conflicting ontological positions (e.g. Marxism and post-structuralism as ‘political’). Third, studies rarely adopt a single or coherent perspective in practice.

In recognition of these problems, the chosen approach is to adopt a classification that is hopefully meaningful, empirically and theoretically, and to explore theoretical tensions as well as the scope for integration and development, particularly in relation to rational–socio-psychological distinctions. The article is organized in the following way. First, six key contextual contemporary perspectives—rational, psychodynamic, dramaturgical, political, cultural and institutional—are outlined and evaluated. These are then mapped out and the possibility and problematics of multiple and integrative theoretical approaches and further research are discussed.

The Rational View

The answer to the question of why ‘new’ ideas are adopted may seem quite simple—because they work or promise to do so. In the latter case, they can still be evaluated subsequently and adopted more widely or discarded as appropriate (Burns and Wholey, 1993). For example, one might imagine that a solution will be sought in response to a particular ‘crisis’ (see Ramsay, 1996). Such a process has been identified at the macro level of the (US) economy whereby dominant ideas (if not practices) in managing employees coincide with economic cycles or long waves (Barley and Kunda, 1992). However, more generally, the rational view is associated with individuals and echoes established models of decision making, although the parallel is not always recognized (see Salaman, 2002). Rogers (1983) for example, sets out an ideal/typical innovation process which begins with a
problem, leads to a search for matching solutions and is followed by evaluation and feedback. Such a process forms the basis of standard project management prescriptions for innovation and training for example (see Tidd, 2001; Phillips, 2000) and, to some, ensures success, such as in relation to using consultants. 'It is difficult to do good consultancy for a bad client, and difficult to do bad consultancy for a good client’ (Cabinet Office, 1994: ii).

The rational view is also reflected in student demands for proven techniques and in the numerous studies that seek to confirm (i.e. promote) a causal link between a management practice and organizational performance (e.g. Huselid, 1995; see Staw and Epstein, 2000). Indeed, this concern has now extended to the competitive value of organizational knowledge and learning more generally (see McEvily and Chakravarthy, 2002).

Some studies suggest that rational practices of idea selection and evaluation are evident in organizations and even increasingly so. For example in regulated environments, especially the public sector, and ‘development’ contexts they have become mandatory or institutionalized (Arthur and Preston, 1996; National Audit Office, 2001). More generally, as scepticism and awareness of the dangers of management faddism (e.g. disruption) grow and capital becomes more ‘impatient’ (Sennett, 1998; Ramsay, 1996), identifying ‘bottom line’ impacts has increased (Beer and Nohria, 2000). Furthermore, even some suppliers of new ideas are promoting evaluation in an attempt to develop longer term relationships with clients and/or earnings as a percentage of identified benefits—from ‘activity to results-based’ consulting (Phillips, 2000; see Kipping, 2002).

To a greater or lesser extent, even those who prescribe rational approaches recognize some of the limitations. Echoing long established critiques of managerial decision making, rationality is, at best, ‘bounded’ (March and Simon, 1958; see Strang and Macy, 2001). In particular, specifying the nature of a problem and objectives is often problematic and the impact/success of practices or interventions is notoriously difficult to isolate (e.g. Wood, 1999). Furthermore, behaving in apparently rational ways can have unintended and counterproductive consequences, such as inspection overload, reduced trust, simplification of activities (in order to be measurable), focusing only on the measurable, and increased costs (see Power, 1997).

A recognition of some of these limitations may lead to more considered prescriptions, pragmatic approaches and contingent explanations. For example, seeking tenders from consultants or drawing on social capital to ensure trust in relationships are seen as substitutes for more rigorous methods (Gluckler and Armbruster, 2003). Similarly, the cost of fully evaluating new practices makes it appropriate only in larger organizations or for innovations of high cost and uncertainty (Phillips, 2000). However, Abrahamson (1991), following Simon (1960) argues that the opposite occurs—the ‘efficient choice’ (i.e. rational) approach is most applicable to explaining adoption in conditions of low uncertainty, which are comparatively rare in management (Salaman, 2002).

Research on this subject is very limited. Nevertheless, and perhaps not surprisingly in the context of management, some writers retain an albeit measured faith in the possibility and value of rational action—managers can indeed get ‘beyond the hype’ and develop effective and lasting solutions (Eccles and Nohria, 1992; Nohria et al., 2003). For example, even Abrahamson argues that evaluation
techniques can provide some ‘immunity’ from other social and psychological pressures (1991; see also 1996; Carson et al., 2000). Presumably, the hope would be that the apparent absence of a link, let alone a causal relationship, between the use of popular management ideas and corporate financial performance could then be rectified (Staw and Epstein, 2000). As we shall see, others are seemingly far more sceptical about the possibility of rational management except in so far as it is used to justify and legitimate political and/or emotional concerns and hide chaos, intuition, impulse, equivocality and hypocrisy (e.g. Collins, 2000). However, as Salaman (2002) argues, much of this literature implicitly adopts a rational approach by seeing its absence as a problem to be explained; that is, why do managers seem to adopt flawed (or unproven) ideas enthusiastically? We shall return to this paradoxical situation after exploring some ‘alternatives’ to the rational view.

The Psychodynamic View

In contrast to the image of the manager in the rational view, as purposive, methodical and cognitive, psychodynamic perspectives point to underlying anxieties and yearnings and a corresponding ‘need’ for a potentially comforting sense of order and identity and/or control. Positions vary in terms of references to specific psychoanalytic concepts or a more general concern with existential anxiety. However, the perspective is typically associated with emotionally informed (‘charged’), sometimes impulsive, decisions to adopt, often simplistic and rational ideas without serious attention being given to their likely effectiveness for the organization (Jackall, 1988). Gill and Whittle (1992) for example refer to ‘fight/flight’ where survival rests on destroying or evading the ‘enemy’ (i.e. competitors) and to ‘dependency’ on an all-powerful leader (i.e. guru or idea) who is beyond criticism. Others point to competing psycho-social processes such as an existential interest in both autonomy and belonging so that, paradoxically, managers want ‘to be seen to be using some new technique both before and at the same time as everyone else’, respectively (Huczynski, 1993: 187). Such anxiety does not preclude apparently rational managerial behaviour however, in that this too holds the promise of providing a sense of security, order and identity (Scarborough and Corbett, 1992; Power, 1997). Indeed, managers may often recognize the promise of a sense of reassurance provided by strategic planning for example (e.g. Watson, 1994).

Psychodynamics is often drawn on to help account for the transience of management ideas in that they are adopted without consideration of effectiveness and soon discarded as they fail to deliver either organizational renewal or existential security. However, positions vary as to the extent to which this can be addressed. Many observers relate managerial anxieties to particular, cultural (e.g. individualism), organizational (e.g. hierarchy), personality (e.g. self-confidence) and, in particular, economic (e.g. competition) contexts (Gill and Whittle, 1992; Jackall, 1988). This implies that it is primarily a social phenomenon which is therefore open to being modified. The problem of impulsiveness and short-termism, for example, might be lessened by changing organizational and ownership structures and recruitment, development and reward systems or, as noted,
practices to provide some ‘immunity’ against ‘psychosocial vulnerabilities’ (Abrahamson, 1991, 1996). However, others see such dynamics differently, as more firmly embedded in capitalism and/or as universal and natural and therefore not readily amenable to resolution (Sturdy, 1997; Jackson, 2001). Psychodynamics has been highly influential, not least because it is evident in many media accounts of management gurus and faddism and because of its challenge to the rational view. However, it has also become a focus of critique, principally for its portrayal of managers—so anxious and under pressure that they will adopt almost anything, especially if others are doing so (Thomas, 1993; Fincham, 1999). Such a critique is often valid, but it is partial. It is not only managers who experience anxiety, and securing a sense of identity is not passive or pathological behaviour. As we shall see, managers are often active and tactical in the production and transformation of ideas (Benders and van Veen, 2001) and/or increasingly cynical of them (Alvarez and Cormas, 2001). This does not mean that there are not still pressures to adopt or to secure a sense of self through them, as ‘progressive’ for example, but ambivalence is a more likely outcome (Kunda, 1991). Such critiques are important in de-pathologizing the psychodynamic approach even if a tendency towards essentialism and the neglect of contextual specificity remains.

The Dramaturgical View (Rhetoric)

The rational and psychodynamic perspectives focus on managerial demands for solutions and identity/security. By contrast, the dramaturgical view focuses on the supply side of the relationship, on the persuasive power of agents such as gurus, consultants, academics, trainers, authors—their charisma and (verbal and non-verbal) presentation techniques. Such an emphasis could draw on a wide range of literature, such as that of training, communication, and attitude change for example (e.g. Festinger, 1957; Guirdham, 1999; Buckley and Caple, 1995), or more political approaches such as the sociology of translation (e.g. Callon, 1986), and would benefit from doing so. However, typically authors draw on concepts of rhetoric and social interaction as drama—dramaturgy (Goffman, 1974). Overall, impression management is key, not content, although ‘the content (i.e. packaging) is itself part of the performance’ (Grint, 1997: 733).

The term ‘rhetoric’ is typically contrasted with reality or truth—‘mere rhetoric’—and this view persists in the business media and rationalist literature—‘rhetoric is rarely appropriate or necessary in business’ (Markham, 1997: 163). Others are more circumspect or dismissive of the distinction depending on their ontological positions. Fineman and Gabriel for example, in their study of the rhetoric in OB textbooks, suggest that it ‘grows out of the recognition that language does not simply reflect reality, but constitutes it’ (1994: 377). In this view then, adopting new ideas from books or personal interaction for example can be achieved discursively (see Ford and Ford, 1995; Watson, 1995). This is seen by some as particularly true in management, given its communication-intensive and especially ambiguous nature (Kieser, 1997). Knowledge becomes ‘credible stories’ (Alvesson, 1993).
From across the range of these perspectives, a whole host of rhetorical practices or techniques have been identified and connected to different agents and ideas (e.g. see Cleverley, 1971; Clark and Greatbatch, 2002). Many, like Huczynski (1993), start with Aristotle’s three core elements of rhetoric—source credibility, emotional appeal and logical proof—while others, like Jackson (2002), adopt a more explicitly psychodynamic approach. Relatedly, but at a more basic level, ideas are associated with different types of benefit (e.g. universal, organizational and personal) and/or threat such as the violent rhetoric of BPR (Grint and Case, 1998). At the same time, rhetorical forms are contrasted, such as those used by gurus and consultants—‘persuasion as charisma and technique’ (Fincham, 2002: 194; Senge and Lim, 1997)—although attention is rarely given to the varying interests of the audience, such as different levels of management for example.

Revealing such practices does shed some light on how and why ideas are adopted. However and whatever the claimed importance attached to interaction, as long as the focus remains almost exclusively on the persuasive strategies of promoters, other agents, especially the ‘audience’, are rendered distorted, obscure or invisible (see Watson, 1995). Recipients are, of course, partially revealed through rhetoric (Atkinson, 1984) and in a sense the dramaturgical approach combines all the other ‘demand’ perspectives on adoption. However, it is typically an implicit, assumed and generalized picture of recipients which, given the tendency to focus on successful rhetoric, once again gives rise to the conception of them as the victims of the clever tricks of organizational ‘witchdoctors’ (Micklewait and Wooldridge, 1996). Moreover, it reinforces the dominant view of a top-down knowledge diffusion process, rather than one based on interaction, contestation and transformation (see Giroux and Taylor, 2002; Sturdy, 2002). Indeed, more generally, rhetorical analyses from different (e.g. interactionist) perspectives neglect broader issues of power (see Grint and Case, 1998). Management ideas are not simply ways of talking and thinking, but legitimate, represent and/or constitute particular (e.g. capitalist, patriarchal, western and contradictory) forms of work organization while silencing others (e.g. Parker, 2002). Furthermore, the immediate cultural context is also often obscured from view. By contrast, as we shall see, other studies are more sensitive to these issues.

The Political View(s)

Given the managerialist nature of much of the literature and the related popularity of interactionist and psychodynamic perspectives, more critical and political approaches are less visible, but they are perhaps more varied. Broadly speaking, they are concerned with the instrumental use of ideas to secure power and/or with their content in terms of their material and/or discursive power effects. Of course, these issues reflect longstanding concerns with management politics and ideology as well as more recent critical interest in discourse analysis (Bendix, 1956; Braverman, 1974; Pettigrew, 1985; Rose, 1989), but some relate more specifically to patterns and practices of adoption (e.g. Ramsay, 1977; Thomas, 2003).

At a basic level, however good the rhetoric, which ideas and practices are diffused depends in part on who has control of the means of dissemination. The
role of large and multinational organizations, including those in the media, consultancy, ‘development’ and education areas, is crucial and this typically involves an asymmetrical economic relationship. Notwithstanding the often flawed assumptions of a causal relationship between specific management practices and economic success and of the possibility of transferability, ideas flow mostly from the powerful (see Smith and Meiksins, 1995). This means that, currently, it is mostly western, especially US and neo-liberal, ideas that are spread, or at least promoted (Kostera, 1995; Chanlat, 1996; Locke, 1989). At a different level, asymmetrical economic power is evident in most organization–subsidiary, joint venture and supply relations and this shapes levels of diffusion and resistance. Child and Rodrigues (1996), for example, link power relations with varying learning outcomes—behavioural and cognitive. Similarly and as we shall see in relation to institutions, within a particular firm, sector or society, agents with symbolic and/or regulatory as well as economic power are crucial gatekeepers of diffusion (e.g. business elites, professions, governments) (Guillen, 1994; Buchanan and Badham, 1999).

Historically, the continuing creation and spread of management ideas such as, say, human relations and strategy has been seen by some to serve an ideological role for management as a function and group, in justifying and explaining ‘both the way in which work is managed and, indeed, the fact that it is managed—by others’ (Hales, 1993: 68). The emergence and dominance of particular management ideas can also be seen in terms of competition between different management functions or occupations, both generally and within individual organizations, as they compete for dominance and status (e.g. accountants, marketers, etc.) (Armstrong, 1986; Whittington and Whipp, 1992). Similarly, ideas are sought, adopted and/or championed by particular individuals to support/defend their career interests, even if they recognize that the idea may be flawed (see Watson, 1994). More generally, Grint (1997), using Veblen’s ideas, argues that high status groups in consumer societies (such as management) adopt consumption patterns to distance themselves from others and so seek to ‘move on’ when fashions become too popular—a ‘distancing’ perspective (see also Carter and Crowther, 2000).

Whatever the claimed or apparent motives for adoption, it is clear that management ideas and practices are powerful in that they reflect and prescribe particular (e.g. western, masculine) (Wilson, 1996; Sinclair, 1997) ways of thinking and acting and silence others (Grey, 1999; Parker, 2002). This has been an increasing focus of study arising out of the view of power as an *effect*, rather than a commodity/possession, achieved through various actor-networks (Bloomfield and Best, 1992) or discourses (Bernstein, 1990). For example, Rose (1989) shows how psychological concepts such as attitude, personality and group were used to ‘govern’ populations and came to transform our very sense of ourselves—how we think, feel and learn (see also Hollway, 1991). More recently, strategic, enterprise and emotion discourses have come to the fore (Knights and Morgan, 1991; du Gay and Salaman, 1992; Fineman, 2000), but an echo of earlier realist studies of ideology often remains (e.g. Salaman, 2002; Thomas, 2003).

Unlike the other perspectives discussed so far, the political view highlights how ideas and practices and the means of dissemination are contested. This is, of course, relatively well documented in relation to the need to secure alliances and
dependencies in organizational change programmes (e.g. Buchanan and Badham, 1999) and to labour and levels of commitment or behavioural compliance, for example (e.g. Edwards et al., 1998). However, new ideas and practices and the agents who help introduce them can pose a threat to managerial identities as competent as well as to their individual and functional power—‘empowerment’ and middle-managers for example (Scarborough and Burrell, 1996). This threat is well illustrated in a quote from a manager about consultants cited by Sturdy (1997: 403)—‘I like working with consultants (provided that they report to me and not my boss!!)’. This highlights the potential for variability in explaining the adoption of ideas and the different barriers, beyond those associated with ‘technically’ flawed implementation and resistance to change (Ramsay, 1996).

Indeed, more radical perspectives point to underlying and persistent tensions in organizations—the system effects of capitalist employment relations, for example (Smith and Meiksins, 1995). Here, resistance does not simply reflect a barrier to the adoption of ideas, but serves as a stimulus to it as well (see also Beech et al., 2002). Ramsay (1977), for example, argued that various forms of employee participation have emerged dialectically, at times when management control is challenged by labour. For some, such patterns are inevitable since management ideas/practices aimed at securing the control of employees are likely to fail or create new difficulties as they treat the symptoms not the cause of problems (Edwards, 1979; Marglin, 1979).

Others, however, present such tensions not so much in political terms but more as dilemmas of organizational design, such as degrees of centralization (Abrahamson, 1996) or as being context specific rather than cyclical (Guillen, 1994). Indeed, most political perspectives tend to generalize the processes of adoption, focusing on structured interests and outcomes (see Giroux and Taylor, 2002) rather than context—historical and social, time and place—or ‘relevance’. Why, for example, do some ideas spread while others do not or do so in a different time and sequence? Such questions are the focus of cultural and, in particular, institutional perspectives to which we now turn.

**The Cultural View**

The spread of management ideas and practices across cultures has long been a concern of international business and, more recently, studies of globalization and management learning. However, culture tends to be neglected in national, sectoral and organizational diffusion research. This is surprising given that, beyond the USA, much diffusion is effectively cross-national or ‘Americanization’. Furthermore, culture is evident at multiple levels within and between organizations as is evident in diffusion associated with organizational mergers (Cartwright and Cooper, 1996) as well as sectoral, occupational or gender cultures, for example (Parker, 1995; du Gay, 1996). In essence, the cultural view draws attention to the locally embedded nature of knowledge such that culture can act as a bridge or barrier to transfer. Thus, to a greater extent than other perspectives, it is concerned with the nature or particular form of management ideas and practices. So, for example, the idea of empowerment may be presumed to spread more readily in individualistic and egalitarian cultures and require adaptation elsewhere
(Fan, 1998; Bhagat et al., 2002), although some see ideas and practices as varying in their inherent transferability—compare the assembly line and emotional intelligence, for example (e.g. Tayeb, 1996; see Czarniawska and Sevon, 1996). Similarly, the methods through which new ideas are introduced and learned are considered culture-specific (e.g. Warner, 1991).

Stories and stereotypes abound of the culture clashes that constrain cross-national communication whether in terms of specific practices (Guirdham, 1999) or broad ethnocentric categories (Hofstede, 1980). The perspective is illustrated well in studies of diffusion through international joint ventures where, for many, the dominant barrier is national or regional cultural incompatibilities between partners. For example, and in direct contrast to the political view, Lam argues that ‘many of the problems lie not in structural barriers’, but in the ‘socially embedded nature’ of the knowledge transferred (1997: 974–5; see also Bhagat et al., 2002). Similarly, cross-cultural sensitivity and language skills through training and recruitment are prescribed as a managerial route to success (e.g. Richards, 1997; Villinger, 1996; Cyr and Schneider, 1996).

However, others offer more nuanced analyses (Simon and Davies, 1996). For example, Child and Rodrigues (1996) point to cultural (social identity) plurality and fluidity within organizations and to the possibility of connections as well as clashes in knowledge transfer. Others show how it is not so much a question of compatibility between ideas and context but resonance, as innovation implies some challenge to existing arrangements (Butler, 1986). Moreover, in certain contexts, ideas and practices are attractive precisely because they are alien or, more precisely, Japanese or North American. However, this ‘dominance effect’ (Smith and Meiksins, 1995) is often neglected in the cultural view, perhaps because it politicizes diffusion—as progress or neo-imperialism (Kostera, 1995)? Beyond increasing cultural training and awareness and making minor adaptations to ideas and dissemination methods, addressing other possible obstacles and facilitators to diffusion such as control relations is not considered (Sturdy, 2001). Such a limitation is addressed in part by the more inclusive institutional perspective although, as we shall see, this shares other weaknesses with the cultural view.

The Institutional View

Institutional theory has become dominant in organizational studies. It demonstrates various societal or social influences on organizational practices—their institutional ‘embeddedness’ (Tolbert and Zucker, 1996). Its ‘central tenet’ is that ‘organizations sharing the same environment will employ similar practices’ (i.e. isomorphism) (Kostova and Roth, 2002: 215) and, like other perspectives, it presents a challenge to the rational view (Strang and Macy, 2001). Practices are adopted for symbolic reasons—seeking peer and shareholder legitimacy—rather than, or even regardless of, efficiency or control outcomes (Whittington, 1992: 707). However, both factors are often recognized with institutions either mediating or constructing economic criteria (e.g. Bierstecker, 1995; Whitley, 1992). Moreover, securing legitimacy from institutional sources can have economic consequences in terms of share prices and CEO salaries, for example (Staw and Epstein, 2000).
In giving primacy to social context, institutional approaches are concerned with variety as well as homogeneity in that they show how the spread of ideas and practices occurs differently in terms of time, sequence, context (e.g. region, state, sector or ‘field’) and extent. It is thus an important counter to notions of convergence (Whitley, 1994) or cyclical trends (see Barley and Kunda, 1992). For example, Guillen’s classic study (1994) compared the spread of key streams of management thought (e.g. scientific management) historically in different countries. Here, in parallel with the rational view, organizational ‘problems’ are experienced by managers, but adoption is shaped by institutional factors, such as the ‘mentality’ of local business elites (e.g. humanism); role of professional and educational groups and networks, and of state bodies (e.g. regulators); and employee responses and industrial relations systems (see also Alvarez, 1996; Abrahamson and Rosenkopf, 1997).

Variability in institutional conditions is seen to account for different levels, as well as patterns, of adoption. Guillen for example, distinguishes between the ideologies and techniques associated with particular management approaches and argues that either can be adopted independently. In the case of human relations in Spain, for instance, its ideology was adopted by both business elites and practitioners, but it was not widely practised (1994). Similarly, practices may be adopted, but largely in a ‘ceremonial’ way, in compliance with regulation for example (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Kostova and Roth, 2002). Such distinctions are useful, but fail to account fully for the ways in which ideas and practices are adapted to local contexts and interests within organizations and networks (see Robertson et al., 1996). Indeed, there tends to be an emphasis on the different groups and ‘carriers’ involved and how they shape the diffusion process, rather than on the ideas and practices (Thomas, 2003; see Botti, 1998).

Contrary to a number of criticisms, this has been a focus in innovation diffusion research and elsewhere. Rogers (1995), for example, talks of quite substantial changes as ‘reinvention’ although there is a range of forms of selective appropriation (see Clark, 1987) or combination of ideas into hybrids (Botti, 1998; Ezzamel et al., 1994). In addition and in response to some of the criticisms of institutional approaches, a ‘Scandinavian institutionalism’ has emerged (quietly), which recognizes and explores change as well as stability, in terms of both ideas and their de-/institutionalization (e.g. Rovik, 1996). For example, in a largely neglected, but important, work, Czarniawska and Joerges (1996) see organizational change in terms of the ‘travels’ and materialization of ideas—transformed into relatively disembedded ‘quasi-objects’ (e.g. labels and 2x2 matrices) and sometimes embedded and transformed as actions, objects and institutions (see also Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall, 2003).

This gives primacy over ideas and practices to the role of different actors such as trainers, publishers, teachers, consultants and managers who package, translate and sustain them, as well as to material (non-human) actors such as IT. While others have examined this (e.g. Huczynski, 1993), the emphasis here derives from the influence of actor-network theory (‘translation’), which also focuses on how actors are themselves translated (Law, 1992). Although in many ways (e.g. ontologically) quite distinct from institutional theory (see Latour, 1986; Lee and Hassard, 1999), it has been influential in its development in exploring management ideas (e.g. Furusten, 1999) as well as more generally (Giroux and Taylor,
2002) and in its own right (Collins, 2000; Doorewaard and van Bistjerveld, 2001; Bloomfield and Best, 1992).

Despite these developments and its dominance, institutional theory has been subject to criticism (Wilkinson, 1996). Firstly, broader power dynamics are underplayed or taken for granted (Smith and Meiksins, 1995). As already intimated, new practices can be imposed without widespread institutional or cultural resonance or are subject to resistance which partly transcends the local context—the ‘dull compulsion’ of economic relations (Sturdy, 2001). Moreover, value systems (e.g. Confucian beliefs in Japan) may not so much determine organizational practices or their transfer, but used tactically to legitimate economic motives (i.e. ideological control) (Dore, 1973; Littler, 1982). However, this criticism simply replaces one form of determinism (socio-cultural) with another (economic). Institutional theory tends to aggregate, ignoring ‘eclectic’ companies/nations which do not fit the institutionally shaped pattern of the sector/region (Oliver, 1992; Clark and Mueller, 1996). While there has been some attempt to incorporate a concept of human agency into analysis to account for diversity and change within a local context (e.g. Hung and Whittington, 1997; Whitley and Kristensen, 1996), criticisms remain relevant (e.g. Thomas, 2003). Indeed and as we shall see in the following discussion, the scope for integrating perspectives is limited.

Discussion and Conclusion—Rational and/or Emotional?

Following this analysis, we are now in a position to draw together some theoretical problems and possibilities in researching the adoption of management ideas and practices. We have seen how the rational view dominates prescriptive accounts as well as providing a point of departure for others. It draws attention to the cognitive and evaluative nature of managerial processes and has become especially relevant empirically as scepticism over fads and preoccupation with financial returns from new practices have grown. However, there is some variation in the extent to which established critiques of rationality (as bounded) are acknowledged. Many writers retain a strong, utopian faith in the possibility of adopting ideas and practices on the basis of objective evaluation (see Ten Bos, 2000). This view is strongly countered by the psychodynamic approach, which opens up managerial impulsiveness and emotional and existential concerns. At its best, these are presented as both firmly embedded and associated with managerial agency, rather than simply treatable pathologies of impotent actors. A similar problem is evident in the related dramaturgical perspective which, in focusing on the persuasive powers of texts and speakers and the packaging of ideas, tends to present managers as vulnerable or gullible and diffusion as a one-way and largely uncontested process. However, it does serve to draw attention to the importance of interaction and of the discursively produced nature of much, if not all, management knowledge.

Managerial discourse also forms part of what has been described as the political view. Although heterogeneous, this is concerned with the value and outcomes of management ideas as well as the role, influence and transformation of different mediators. Here, it is important to emphasize how power and, sometimes overt,
Contestation are important stimuli to action, rather than simply obstacles to the diffusion of knowledge. Whether or not new ideas are seen in functionalist or ideological terms as supporting particular class, organizational, occupational or individual interests, it is clear that their emergence comes to shape how we act and feel—power as an effect. In this sense, politics and culture come together, although the cultural perspective (along with some others) tends to eschew concepts of power such as that of the employment relationship. Rather, emphasis is placed on the different forms of knowledge and learning and how their embedded nature serves as a barrier or, sometimes, a bridge to adoption. Although typically associated with the field of international business, cultural issues are universally relevant, and not simply because most new ideas in management emerge from the USA. Sensitive accounts recognize the plurality and fluidity of cultures at the organizational level, for example, even if there is a tendency to underestimate the structural nature of diffusion. This weakness is less evident in the related and dominant institutional approach, where the role of regulation and labour relations and markets for example are seen as important. More generally, in yet another counter to the rational view, it focuses on organizations securing legitimacy through new ideas and recognizes variability in the depth and breadth of adoption. This allows for useful comparative and historical analyses, but variation within particular contexts (i.e. managerial agency) and, until recently at least, the fragility and translation of ideas and actors, are not always adequately explained.

At the risk of simplification, the different perspectives can be reduced to different factors—organizational effectiveness; relieving anxiety and securing identity; successful rhetoric; furthering career, function, status or control; cultural resonance or meaning; and securing organizational legitimacy. Not surprisingly, these connect to various experiential dimensions of management more generally (see Hales, 1993; Watson, 1996). Indeed, this was the intention—a motivational context for management learning. Moreover, some approaches to diffusion use different levels of analysis which are sometimes quite removed from the managerial agent—what Grint refers to as ‘external’ perspectives (1997). For example, reference has been made to macroeconomic cycles of innovation and to institutional contexts. Similarly, an alternative approach, and one with a long tradition in innovation (see Rogers, 1995), is to account for adoption at the level of the firm—‘organizational innovativeness’. Here, various characteristics are identified which explain, or at least signal, innovative firms (or societies) (Weinstein and Kochan, 1995; Whitley, 2000). Clearly, despite the level of analysis, such an approach gives rise to practical implications for managing innovation (Tidd, 2001; Wolfe, 1994) that have been developed with some intensity in recent years in the broader context of knowledge management and the management of learning, particularly in relation to the value of networks, for example (e.g. Brown and Duguid, 2001; Swan et al., 2002). The adoption of ideas has itself become an adopted idea.

Aside from the value of giving voice to and evaluating the range of available perspectives, which has been otherwise ignored, and the potential heuristic utility (and obstacle) of categorization, how can the identified approaches be developed? What are the possibilities for, and desirability of, theoretical integration, for example? Clearly, theoretical perspectives are largely a matter of choice, founded on prior assumptions for example. However, within certain constraints, they may also be deployed according to their empirical relevance. Hopefully, it is clear from
this discussion that each approach provides insight into why managers adopt ideas and practices. Therefore, one might intuitively seek to identify the relative significance of different factors in any given case of adoption. Was it more a case of securing legitimacy and clever rhetoric than systematic evaluation, for example? In other words, there are not only different perspectives, but individually, they are limited. This is perhaps not surprising, as most people would concede that the adoption of ideas is multidimensional managers may adopt ideas on the basis of both systematic evaluation and social influence, for example (Abrahamson and Rosenkopf, 1993). Indeed, many studies combine different approaches, often implicitly, especially where the focus is on particular aspects of diffusion such as transience, channels or innovativeness.

A more conscious, but unusual use of multiple perspectives is achieved through a contingent approach, whereby different accounts of adoption are seen as appropriate depending on the circumstances (see also Van de Ven and Poole, 1995). For example, we have noted how Abrahamson regards the rational view as more appropriate in situations of low uncertainty (1991; see also Ramsay, 1996), although Tolbert and Zucker (1983) argue that early adopters may be more rational than the ‘herds’ of followers. Similarly, Child and Rodrigues (1996) point to different power (resource) and social relationships between joint venture partners and the extent to which these shape the type of adoption. Clearly, and in keeping with contingent approaches generally, one might add a whole host of factors, such as levels of management or types of knowledge, and perhaps gain some insight from doing so. For example, managers in a position or at a level where they will be held responsible for implementation, or those in quantitative functional cultures, for example, might be more inclined to attempt systematic evaluation. However, and again in parallel with the contingency view of organizational practices, the result is, paradoxically, ever increasing complexity and a vain search for predictability (e.g. Wood, 1979) (see Table 1). Moreover, and as we shall see, although the approaches are not always mutually exclusive, they are not simply equivalent nor necessarily commensurable.

There is neither the scope nor the need to examine the issue of commensurability (Burrell and Morgan, 1979) and subsequent debates in organizational studies here. There are, for example, not only tensions between the different approaches, but within them as well. For example, essentialism and/or realism in psychody-

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Perspective</th>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Strength</th>
<th>Weakness</th>
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<tr>
<td>Rational</td>
<td>Effective for organization</td>
<td>Prescriptive</td>
<td>Idealistic</td>
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<tr>
<td>Psychodynamic</td>
<td>Anxiety/identity</td>
<td>Emotion focus</td>
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<td>Dramaturgical</td>
<td>Rhetoric</td>
<td>Integrative</td>
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<td>Political</td>
<td>Interests/effects</td>
<td>Critical</td>
<td>Functionalist</td>
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<td>Cultural</td>
<td>Fits values</td>
<td>Contextual</td>
<td>Apolitical</td>
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<tr>
<td>Institutional</td>
<td>Imposed/legitimation</td>
<td>Comparative/integrative</td>
<td>Deterministic</td>
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<td>Multi-dimensional</td>
<td>Various</td>
<td>Inclusive</td>
<td>Non-integrative</td>
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<td>Contingency</td>
<td>It depends</td>
<td>Flexibility</td>
<td>‘Relativist’</td>
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Note: a In order to provide an overview and focus, the table necessarily contains some generalizations.
namics are incompatible with the constructivism of culturalist views, and the structuralism of institutional theory cannot always be reconciled with discursive approaches (see Morgan and Sturdy, 2000). Similarly, and as already noted, various conceptions of power comprise the political approach—as a potential or an effect for instance. While such tensions are not always recognized in multidimensional accounts of adoption themes, we have already seen how some perspectives are more integrative than others, partly as a result of theoretical development. For example, institutional approaches typically incorporate rational (economic), political and cultural themes (Grint, 1997) and even contextual aspects of subjectivity and discourse. Given the seemingly multidimensional nature of adoption, such integration is intuitively attractive. However, and as we have seen, the approach is not without its limitations, even for those who are attracted to grand narratives. Nevertheless, there is a problematic distinction that remains, and runs through all the main approaches discussed—that of the rational and non-rational. This is revealed by more recent developments in social and organizational theory which problematize dualisms and categorization, but also open up new avenues for research into the adoption of ideas.

We have seen how five of the six identified perspectives provide an explicit counter to the rational approach. Adoption is not based on a systematic assessment of solutions to organizational problems, but on impulse, persuasion, power, cultural resonance and legitimation, or is subsumed within them. It also forms the basis of the few available accounts of the literature—‘logic and emotion’ or ‘rationality and contagion’ (Grint, 1997; Strang and Macy, 2001; see Salaman, 2002, emphasis added). As we shall see, not only is the separation problematic empirically, but it results in more fundamental theoretical problems as well as a pathologizing of the ‘non-rational’ and, in some critical perspectives, an empirical neglect of the ‘rational’ management of diffusion.

Given the modernist nature of management, it is not surprising that the separation is evident in prescriptive, rationalist accounts or checklists warning managers of the dangers of following the latest fads and their promoters non-rationally (e.g. Gibson and Tesone, 2001; see Ten Bos, 2000). However, it is also present in more sophisticated (modernist) academic analyses. For example, Abrahamson, in a highly influential article, presents the demand for new management techniques as being shaped by a ‘competition’ between ‘technoeconomic forces’ and ‘sociopsychological vulnerabilities’ (1996: 274–5, original emphasis). The former are considered real and the latter obstacles or the product of superstition.

The plea then is not to passively watch sociopsychological forces shape technically inferior management fashions, but to act in a scientifically informed manner in order to render . . . fashion setting a more real, as opposed to superstitious learning process. (Abrahamson, 1996: 275)

By contrast, and as already intimated, other ‘critical’ perspectives see rationality as ultimately unobtainable, other than as a legitimating smokescreen, psychological ‘comfort blanket’, cultural ritual or rhetorical device, for example. While this provides an important challenge to the rationalism of managerial prescriptions, it effectively dismisses rationality completely, hiding it from view. An
alternative approach is to see ‘technoeconomic’ forces and the ‘sociopsychological’ as mutually constituting. Existential anxiety, for instance, can be seen as a condition and consequence of individualizing organizational and socio-economic structures, not something that can be marginalized or ‘treated’ (Sturdy, 1997). At a more general level, and as noted earlier, literature from the sociology of science (and knowledge) and actor-network theory in particular, has problematized the related technical–social distinction (e.g. Latour, 1987; Bijker, 1995; Blackler, 1995). This is pursued not through reduction, but by exploring how it is constructed and sustained in networks of human and other ‘actants’. Indeed, this is evident within the research on the adoption of management ideas, even increasingly so (Bloomfield and Best, 1992; see also Giroux and Taylor, 2002).

Parallel debates in sociology and organization studies on dualisms (see Knights, 1997; Reed, 1997) have also developed in relation to emotion and its relative neglect in both fields. These challenge the conventional opposition between rationality and emotion, mind and body (Albrow, 1997; Fineman, 2000). For example, Barbalet (1998) compares the ‘critical’ position whereby emotion can be seen as a legitimate or alternative approach to rationality and a ‘radical’ position, adopted here, where the two are seen as continuous yet conceptually distinct. More straightforwardly, this can be seen in the notion that the pursuit of objectivity is also a ‘passion’ for objectivity—emotion is necessary for producing reliable (or other) knowledge (Williams and Bendelow, 1996: 151; Jaggar, 1989) as well as making decisions (Toda, 1980).

Unlike the theoretical challenges to the social–technical distinction, however, such perspectives have yet to be incorporated into the literature on the adoption of management ideas and practices. What is missing therefore is a renewed focus on, and recognition of, ‘rational’ practices, such as the use of quantitative evaluation techniques or less systematic practices, but one that presents them, not as an ideal or simply bounded, but as necessarily emotional (as well as cultural, political and institutionalized and rhetorical). This clearly requires a departure from the objectivism of the rational approach, as well as the reductionism of many of the sociopsychological views, and does not remove all potential incompatibilities between perspectives. However, there are a number of possible theoretical and methodological options to choose from, especially in the sociological stream of organizational theory (Fineman, 2000; Sturdy, 2003).

For example, an ‘under-emotionalized’, but distinct, element of actor-network theory explores the translation of human (as well as other) actants as innovations are sustained. This has been developed elsewhere in relation to management ideas and the transformation of identities (e.g. Czarniawska and Joerges, 1996), but would benefit from a ‘kind of’ emotional sociology of management knowledge (see Fox, 1994b). Indeed, and in keeping with the theoretical developments more generally, this would include the growing or renewed recognition of emotion as integral to learning processes and outcomes (e.g. see Management Learning, 1997). Such approaches would help break down a core and limiting theoretical barrier in research on the adoption of ideas and give greater empirical recognition to the rational (i.e. also emotional) practices adopted by managers in doing so (see also Power, 1997; Strang and Macy, 2001). In short, rationality is necessarily political, emotional, cultural, institutional and rhetorical, but not reducible to any of them.
Although rationality–emotionality is one of the most pressing and theoretically exciting areas of development, there is, of course, considerable scope for research in other directions as well. Recent studies continue to claim that the area remains broadly under-developed (e.g. Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall, 2003) and the foregoing discussion has gone some way towards identifying a number of specific and general limitations, gaps and emerging themes. In the hope of stimulating further research and by way of closing, four areas can be highlighted. First, and in keeping with the impetus for this article, there is a need to break down some of the field barriers and to draw on insights available from established and emerging studies of ideas and innovation from other academic disciplines, not least those of management learning. Second, relatedly and as intimated by the number and range of references cited here, attention has been focused on the promotion and initial adoption of ideas. Their implementation and impact are either ignored or studied narrowly in relation to organizational change or within broader political or functional (e.g. HRM, marketing) domains. Furthermore, ideas and practices that are abandoned and, in particular, those which fail to get widely disseminated and the processes through which this occurs, would provide an important and insightful corrective to the attention given to popular and sustained ideas. Moreover, such a focus might give greater emphasis to the partly random, chance, unplanned and ultimately unpredictable nature of such processes (Czarniawska and Joerges, 1996; Thomas, 2003).

Third, and despite the recent attention elsewhere to knowledge management and networks (‘co-production’), as well as the important contribution of theories of translation and interaction, a traditional tendency to view the ‘diffusion’ process as one-way and top-down remains. More research is needed on the construction and appropriation of ideas and associated multiple and multidirectional interactions, such as those between and among management consultants and clients or students and teachers. Fourth, and relatedly, studies tend to rely on using a narrow range of methods such as citation indices, texts and presentations and/or post hoc accounts from interviews. These fail to provide sufficient insight into the ongoing processes through which ideas, practices and other actors are produced, adopted, negotiated, translated, abandoned and/or rejected. In other words, they often do not address the very questions they set out to answer. Thus, despite the growth of studies on the adoption of management ideas and practices, there remain a number of theoretical, empirical and methodological paths to explore.

Notes

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1. The term diffusion has been rightly subject to criticism, notably from the perspective of the sociology of translation or actor-network theory, where the term ‘translation’ is preferred. Essentially, diffusion is seen to imply that ideas have an initial inertia and that their subsequent transformation or obstruction are problems to be explained. By contrast, the term translation recognizes that the spread of ideas in time and space ‘is in
the hands of people’ with interests and it is ‘faithful transmission’ that most needs to be explained (see Latour, 1986: 266–7). Despite this, diffusion is used here as a generic term in keeping with the range of theories covered. Moreover, contrary to the critique, classic studies of diffusion do in fact incorporate the inevitable transformation or ‘re-invention’ of innovations, for example (e.g. Rogers, 1995; Clark, 1987).

2. The classification has been explored and refined through use with managerial research participants and post-experience teaching.

3. Financial measures are, of course, only one indicator of performance outcomes of innovations (Tidd, 2001).

4. See for example the under-recognized work of Huczynski (1993), where a market model of diffusion/ideas is adopted (see Sturdy and Gabriel, 2000; Thomas, 2003).

References


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