1 The Flow of Management Ideas

Management ideas such as Balanced Scorecard (BSC), Core Competences, Lean Management, Total Quality Management (TQM), Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), Big Data and Agile have received widespread interest from management practitioners and academics alike (Sturdy et al., 2019). This interest may be related to the expansion of management as an ideology and practice in contemporary society, and the important role of a range of traditional management intellectuals (Guillén, 1994) or knowledge entrepreneurs (Clark, 2004a) – which include management gurus, management consultants, business schools and mass media organisations (Abrahamson, 1996; Engwall et al., 2016; Kieser, 1997; Piazza and Abrahamson, 2020; Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall, 2002).

Management ideas are generally presented – mainly via these knowledge entrepreneurs – as an essential guide to management practitioners in performing their tasks, and promote and legitimate the management occupation in general as important for the functioning of contemporary organisations (Sturdy et al., 2019). At the same time, the widespread promotion of these management ideas has led to important questions related to whether these can be considered beneficial or not. Indeed, many of these ideas have been heavily criticised for lacking an adequate scientific basis as well as for possible unfavourable consequences for organisations and their members such as inducing a 'permanent need for organizational change' (Sorge and van Witteloostuijn, 2004: 1209), enhancing the likelihood of 'organizational forgetfulness' (Brunsson and Olsen, 1997: 41; see also Lammers, 1988) and creating 'more stressful and intensive' working conditions (Knights and McCabe, 1998: 163).

In spite of these critiques, management ideas have become widely associated with many, and oftentimes substantial, organisational change programmes (Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999; Strang, 2010), and have a taken-for-granted presence in many textbooks and business school

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curricula. In their recent overview, Piazza and Abrahamson recognised that: 'managers rely on such practices to improve their organizations' effectiveness [...] students of management learn about these techniques in business schools, corporate universities, training programs, industry associations, and the management press' (2020: 17). Some management ideas have even become generally accepted ways of thinking and talking about management and organisation in general (Clark and Salaman, 1998). For example, Sturdy and Gabriel noted that: 'reading Michael Porter or Tom Peters or at least "knowing" their ideas is considered a *sine qua non* for today's practicing manager or business-person' (2000: 983). This has fed the general assumption of knowledge entrepreneurs' success in gaining widespread attention for their ideas, but has also given rise to long-standing debates concerning their influence on the nature of managerial work and organisational life (Sturdy, 2011). For instance, Clark emphasised that these knowledge entrepreneurs can be assumed to have a major impact on the conceptualisation and practice of strategy, yet also recognised that 'how they impact on and influence strategy is presently little understood' (2004b: 105).

Although the literature on management ideas has expanded substantially over the last few decades, and has significantly advanced both empirically and theoretically (Sturdy et al., 2019), *a primary focus on the potential impact of these ideas on management and organisational practice remains*. As Clark explained in his review, the increased research interest in popular management ideas: 'may be partly motivated by a desire to understand the factors which account for the success and impact of a number of leading fashion setters' (2004a: 298), yet offering limited detail on 'the way in which different domains select and then process management ideas and how these then impact on managers' (2004a: 304). In a similar vein some years later, Sturdy and colleagues considered the possible impact as 'a persistent theme in the study of management ideas' (2019: 510), and relate this to the general preoccupation with outcomes and effects in the field of management, and to widely shared concerns about difficulties in realising the potential effects as well as the nature of potential (unintended) effects. Recently, Piazza and Abrahamson emphasised the need to see questions related to the diffusion and use of management ideas as non-trivial particularly 'given the role that management practices play in the management of organizations nationally and globally' (2020: 18).

In addressing concerns about impact, this now large and established literature has developed in different productive directions, focusing primarily on the (macro-level) diffusion of these ideas and on their (micro-level) organisational implementation (e.g. Ansari et al., 2010; Huising,

2016; Reay et al., 2013). Yet, although these individually long-standing, broad and varied approaches have established strong theoretical and empirical bases, they consider only parts of the broader flow of management ideas as they move between different contexts (Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall, 2002), thereby allowing a largely fragmented and incomplete view of their possible impact. As Huising (2016) has succinctly put it: 'Between macro patterns of diffusion and micro processes of organizational change *lies a no-mans land*' (p. 384, emphasis added). In other words, studies on *management idea diffusion* generally do not consider where these ideas go, beyond the broad assumption that some of them receive widespread attention amongst management practitioners and organisations. Adoption here is generally considered a proxy for impact given that 'full use' is typically assumed (cf. Rogers, 1995). At the same time, studies on *management idea implementation* lack a systematic understanding of where these ideas come from beyond the assumption that various pressures may enhance formal adoption. Here, adoption is merely considered a necessary but not sufficient condition for – mainly organisational – impact as it is seen as largely 'unrealised' or undefined. These issues in understanding the impact of management ideas may not only stem from different scholarly traditions (Gray et al., 2015; Sturdy et al., 2019), but may also be an artefact of the increased academic emphasis on research papers or 'experimental reports' (Strang and Siler, 2017: 533) as a dominant genre which may encourage limited foci compared to other genres such as essays and books (Gabriel, 2016; Suddaby, 2019), and may constrain possibilities of addressing the conceptual complexities inherent to studying flow.

In this book we seek to address this lacuna in researching the impact of ideas by considering how *management ideas flow between relevant contexts* (cf. Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall, 2002). A focus on flow contributes to further bridging and extending the broad but largely disconnected literatures of *diffusion and implementation* as it allows us to reveal some of the complexities critical to understanding the impact of management ideas that are currently obscured from view (cf. Sturdy, 2011). For this purpose, our research focuses on management practitioners as audience members that various management knowledge entrepreneurs aim to reach through different media channels such as their books, columns, radio and television appearances, live lectures or via social media and the Internet (Barros and Ruling, 2019). Given the apparent popularity of these traditional and new business media, as well as management education such as MBA programmes, being an audience member can be seen as particularly significant to contemporary management practitioners. After all, managerial audiences are likely to play a critical role in how ideas flow

between different contexts. Indeed, in their role as audience members, management practitioners are not only involved in contexts typically related to management idea diffusion, but also in the implementation of these ideas within and beyond their organisational contexts (Hancock and Tyler, 2019). Theoretically, an audience perspective offers vital possibilities to develop a more comprehensive view on mass communication processes: 'from the structure of the production of the message at one end to audience perceptions and use at the other' (Hall, 1980: 1; see also McQuail, 2010). This is in line with Strang (2010) who emphasises the need for combining a 'greater diversity' (p. 11) of research approaches to studying the impact of ideas.

In sum, rather than understanding the potential impact of a single management idea in terms of its possible widespread diffusion *or* organisational implementation, we seek to explore how these foci can be bridged and extended via studying management practitioners who, as audience members, are considered central actors in the broader flow of ideas between these and other relevant contexts. Therefore, we propose that central to studying the impact of management ideas is the question: *How do management practitioners come to use management ideas in contexts of their working lives?*

Our empirical interest then is in examining how practitioners come to use these ideas in relation to the context of management guru lectures, management and organisational practice, and beyond by analysing managerial audience members' activities and related meaning making prior to, during and after a lecture. We focus on management gurus because they are widely considered as the most high-profile communicators of management ideas (Greatbatch and Clark, 2005). Within the group of knowledge entrepreneurs, management gurus are viewed as having a particularly critical role in the development and communication of these ideas. As Suddaby and Greenwood emphasise, the creation and communication of new ideas by management gurus is a 'starting point for the cycle of knowledge production and consumption' (2001: 249). Management gurus are therefore often viewed as figureheads and leaders of a particular idea movement that in turn influences the activities of the other knowledge entrepreneurs (Bodrozic and Adler, 2018; Huczynski, 1993; Kieser, 1997; Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall, 2002). In addition, their live lectures constitute an important moment of relatively unmediated and bounded consumption that may occur prior to organisational implementation (Carlone, 2006; Clark and Salaman, 1998; Collins, 2012; Grint and Case, 1998; Micklethwait and Wooldridge, 1996). As Greatbatch and Clark (2003) note, these are critical events that 'create the conditions necessary to win and retain converts' (p. 1539) and thus

build the momentum necessary for an idea to become popular and be used in management and organisational practice (see Suddaby and Greenwood, 2001; McCabe, 2011).

A primary focus on managerial audiences is important because it offers vital insights into the complexities concerning how the impact of management ideas becomes apparent and is mediated throughout different relevant contexts (cf. Sturdy, 2011). Shedding more light on managerial audiences both within and beyond mass communication settings may thus permit a better approach to bridging and extending the currently disconnected approaches to researching the impact of ideas. Developing a critical understanding of what it means to be an audience member in the context of management not only constitutes an important basis to further develop our understanding of the broader impact of different management knowledge entrepreneurs and their ideas in different contexts, but also helps expand our view of management occupations and the nature of contemporary managerial work (e.g. Clark and Salaman, 1998; du Gay, 1996; Grey, 1999; Sturdy et al., 2006).

Based on the data, approaches and findings of research on speaker-audience interaction in guru lectures (Greatbatch and Clark, 2003, 2005, 2010, 2017), and audience members' experiences of guru events (Groß et al., 2015) involving a range of leading management thinkers from the USA and Europe (see Chapters 3 and 5, and Appendices 1 and 2 for further details), this book argues that a broader, more differentiated and more dynamic view of managerial audiences is essential to shed more light on important complexities in understanding the broader impact of management ideas as well as on the nature of contemporary managerial work. In this way the book provides an account that foregrounds management practitioners' activities and related meaning making in their role as audience members with regard to contemporary management media which, given the omnipresence of these media, can be assumed as essential in management practitioners' present-day working lives (cf. Barros and Ruling, 2019; Piazza and Abrahamson, 2020). By revealing how individual audience members resolve tensions and ambiguities prior to, during and after a guru lecture which may or may not ultimately result in the organisational adoption of an idea and beyond, the book not only contributes to developing a fertile ground for advancing the flow of management ideas as a critical perspective in researching their broader impact, but also develops a better understanding of management practitioners in their role as audience member. In the following sections we discuss the key streams in the study of the impact of ideas, prior to outlining our audience perspective and providing a general overview of the structure of the book.

Researching the Impact of Management Ideas

During the last few decades, there has been a growing research interest in the potential impact of management ideas (Abrahamson, 1996; Huczynski, 1993; Piazza and Abrahamson, 2020; Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall, 2002; Strang, 2010; Sturdy, 2004). This now large and established field of research (Sturdy et al., 2019) has taken two broad, but largely dispersed directions – one focusing mainly on diffusion and another on implementation. These comprise diverging conceptualisations of adoption and impact that are rooted in their specific application of what they see as relevant *scope* and related attention to *agentic meaning making* (see Table 1.1 for an overview). Again, whilst both research approaches have essential merits individually, they have focused on specific parts of the broader flow of management ideas, thereby allowing

Table 1.1 *Main approaches to researching the impact of management ideas (MIs)*

Key dimensions	Diffusion of MIs	Implementation of MIs
Key research question	How do MIs obtain widespread attention?	How do MIs translate into practice?
Adoption decision	End point	Starting point
Impact	• Full use assumed • Derived from adoption – 'proxy' for impact	• Largely unrealised and undefined • Preceded by adoption – necessary, but not sufficient condition for impact
Scope and agency		
• Level of analysis	Mainly macro: potential adopters in relation to various settings within the context of a broad management-knowledge market, some micro analyses	Mainly micro: adopters in relation to different settings in an (intra-) organisational context, some macro analyses
• Nature of agency	Concerted efforts aimed at obtaining widespread attention amongst management practitioners	Concerted efforts aimed at translating (abstract) ideas into management and organisational practice
• Focal agents	Knowledge entrepreneurs as key *initiators*, organisations and management practitioners in *recipients'* positions, mainly driven by socio-psychological and legitimacy motives	Higher-level managers as key *initiators*, organisational members in *recipients* positions mainly driven by own specific interests

a largely fragmented and incomplete view of their possible impact (cf. Huising, 2016).

Diffusion Approaches

Studies of management idea diffusion focus typically on explaining how ideas are able to obtain widespread attention in the context of a broad management knowledge market (cf. Piazza and Abrahamson, 2020). Here, particular research attention has been given to the processes and conditions that enhance the likelihood of widespread (formal) adoption of these ideas by managers and organisations (e.g. Sturdy, 2004). In line with Strang (2010), the formal adoption of management ideas is widely considered as: 'the end point of most diffusion studies' (p. 10), thereby assuming 'a decision to make full use of an innovation' (Rogers, 1995: 21). In this approach, the impact of management ideas is generally considered as directly derived from adoption. In this way adoption is, arguably, more or less explicitly regarded as a proxy for impact, particularly given that 'full use' tends to be assumed. This influential approach to researching management ideas can be seen as rooted in a specific view on scope and agency.

First, in terms of *level of analysis*, the extant diffusion literature provides a number of mainly macro-level explanations that account for the adoption of management ideas amongst a large population of managers and organisations. The general focus is on a wide variety of different settings in the general context of a broad management knowledge market which may signal acts of 'adoption' of these ideas, such as book sales, business media attention, guru lecture attendances, formal consulting service offerings, formal accreditations and use of change programme labels (Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999; David and Strang, 2006; Furusten, 1999; Westphal et al., 1997; Kieser, 1997; Mazza and Alvarez, 2000; Zeitz et al., 1999). In addition to these macro-level analyses of diffusion, a number of studies have provided detailed analyses of the managerial responses to particular ideas in the micro-level interactions between gurus and their audiences (e.g. Greatbatch and Clark, 2003) and between consultants and their clients (e.g. Sturdy et al., 2009). Overall, this substantial and evolving body of work has explanatory value with regard to understanding the widespread attention to particular ideas amongst an audience of mainly managers and organisations. It provides important evidence that the potential influence of these ideas is driven by multiple forces and signals that, at least for some ideas, the population-level impact can be substantial. Studies of management idea diffusion have particularly contributed to our insight into mainly macro-level processes of 'adoption' in the context of knowledge market exchange.

Second, a substantial number of studies in this influential stream of research have furthered our conceptualisation of the *nature and direction of agency* in relation to processes of diffusion. In particular, a set of mainly macro-level explanations have focused on the way in which management ideas are actively shaped as part of various knowledge products and services so that they are intrinsically attractive to a large group of managers (Clark and Salaman, 1998; Sturdy, 2004; ten Bos and Heusinkveld, 2007). For instance, one group of studies has focused on best-selling management books and highlighted the importance of a focus on a single concept, pithy sentences, promises of significant performance improvement, references to well-known and highly reputable organisations, examples of concrete and successful implementation, interpretive space and a set of shared editorial practices (Furusten, 1999; Giroux, 2006; Grint, 1994; Kieser, 1997; Lischinsky, 2008; Røvik, 2002). Related studies have examined the importance of rhetorical practices and persuasive strategies deployed by different management knowledge entrepreneurs. When deployed effectively, these practices and strategies have been shown to enhance the prominence of their messages and increase audience attentiveness, thus creating the conditions necessary for a managerial audience to empathise with those communicating the ideas (Cullen, 2009; Greatbatch and Clark, 2003, 2005; Jackson, 1996, 2001; Sims, Huxham and Beech, 2009).

Other explanations of management idea diffusion also relate the attractiveness of certain management ideas to the extent in which these have framed their analyses of contemporary management problems and solutions so that they resonate, and are in harmony, with the expectations of their target mass audience, but have downplayed the role of agency (e.g. Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999; Abrahamson and Eisenman, 2008; Barley and Kunda, 1992). Management ideas are unlikely to gain traction with target audiences if they fail to convince them of their plausibility by apprehending the zeitgeist or 'spirit of the times' (Grint, 1994: 193; see also Abrahamson, 1996; Kieser, 1997). The point here is that popular management ideas are assumed to have articulated persuasively both how they address key managerial problems and priorities (e.g. efficiency, performance enhancements, creating effective change), and why they offer the best means to do so at a certain point in time. However, although this particular notion draws on economic approaches to explaining why management ideas may generate a mass appeal (Bikchandani, Hirshleifer and Welch, 1998; Bloom and van Reenen, 2007; Bodrozic and Adler, 2018), in line with Grint (1994) the benefits of particular ideas in terms of means-ends relationships are likely discursively constructed via the zeitgeist – thereby suggesting the role and significance of agency.

Third, concerning the *position and positioning of the key agents*, diffusion studies tend to take different knowledge entrepreneurs as the main focal point and primary setting to understand the impact of management ideas (Abrahamson, 1996; Clark, 2004a; Kieser, 1997; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2001). Sturdy and colleagues observed that within the field, 'most studies focus primarily on one key actor such as management gurus, management consultants, business schools, multinationals, and the business and social media' (2019: 10). Whilst all these actors are considered relevant in understanding the adoption of ideas amongst managers and organisations, they are expected to perform different interdependent roles in the context of a broader management knowledge market or system of management ideas (Mol et al., 2019; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2001). Indeed, in this context, business schools are generally considered to educate the potential consumers of ideas, consultants are associated with processes of knowledge commodification and management gurus are seen as essential in legitimating management knowledge in a particular field (Suddaby and Greenwood, 2001). For instance, drawing primarily on analyses of these books and lectures, a significant body of prior work has helped us understand complex issues concerning the way management gurus, as an important group of knowledge entrepreneurs, use media to build their personal reputations with managerial audiences, and promote their ideas. In particular, this stream of research has significantly advanced our knowledge about gurus' ability to shape their ideas in ways that widely appeal to a mass audience (Clark and Salaman, 1996, 1998; Furusten, 1999; Huczynski, 1993; Jackson, 2001).

In research on diffusion, actors in 'adopter' positions generally receive a 'subordinate and predetermined or highly structured status' (Heusinkveld et al., 2011: 142). On the basis of acts of adoption in these settings – signalling attention to management ideas – theorists have also developed assumptions about the nature and main drivers of actors in these roles (Bort and Kieser, 2019; Wilhelm and Bort, 2013). An important stream of literature suggests that managers and organisations use these ideas primarily in response to legitimacy pressures. In this way organisations seek to *externally* display their conformity to generally accepted norms of how organisations should be governed (e.g. Abrahamson, 1996; Fiss and Zajac, 2006; Peters and Heusinkveld, 2010; Wilhelm and Bort, 2013). In line with this assumption, various diffusion studies have shown that managers' signalling of having adopted a relatively 'new' idea relates to how firms are valued within a society in general and by experts such as stock market analysts in particular (Nicolai et al., 2010; Nijholt et al., 2016; Staw and Epstein, 2000). Such a favourable reputation can have significant consequences for the viability

of an organisation (Benders, 1999). Another explanation for the desirability of popular management ideas amongst those in 'adopter' positions relates to the 'intra-psychic' tensions and search for control and certainty that are generally associated with enacting the managerial task in a world that appears messy, capricious and unstable (Abrahamson, 1996; Gill and Whittle, 1993; Huczynski, 1993; Jackson, 1996; Sturdy, 2004; Wilhelm and Bort, 2013). Thus, these ideas are viewed as attractive to and build dependence from management practitioners, because they help 'satiate individuals' [managers'] *psychological* needs' (Abrahamson, 1996: 271; see also Ernst and Kieser, 2002; Jackall, 1988; Piazza and Abrahamson, 2020). Exemplifying this approach, Watson writes, these ideas are attractive because they help managers to 'create a sense of order in the face of the potential chaos of human existence' (1994: 904).

Implementation Approaches

In relative parallel to this body of work on macro-level diffusion, there is a growing research interest in the mostly micro-level implementation of management ideas (e.g. Benders, 1999; Benders and Verlaar, 2003; Huising, 2016; Kelemen, 2000; Knights and McCabe, 1998; McCabe and Russell, 2017; McCann et al., 2015; Mueller and Carter, 2005; Strang, 2010; van Grinsven et al., 2020). Here studies focus primarily on explaining how these ideas, once formally adopted within organisational contexts, are subsequently transformed or 'translated' into management and organisational practice (e.g. Ansari et al., 2014; Reay et al., 2013; van Grinsven et al., 2016). Thus, adoption is not seen as an end point but as an essential point of departure for a series of concerted efforts within specific, organisational contexts. Viewed in this way, adoption is a necessary condition but no guarantee for impact. Rather studies of implementation typically consider the impact of management ideas – habitually within organisations – as largely unrealised and undefined. This growing stream of research can also be related to a specific view on scope and agency.

First, in terms of *level of analysis*, whilst some analyses have connected to macro-level explanations by showing how organisational experiences may shape the wider evolving reputation of a specific management idea (e.g. Benders et al., 2019; Scarbrough et al., 2015; Zbaracki, 1998), implementation studies typically focus on explaining how abstract ideas, formally adopted at the organisational level, are translated and institutionalised into management and organisational practice (e.g. Ansari et al., 2014; Mueller and Whittle, 2011; Nicolai and Dautwiz, 2010; Reay et al., 2013). The primary focus of most studies is on the efforts of a selected

group of higher-level managers whilst other organisational members are habitually positioned in recipient roles in relation to these initiatives. Although the perceived 'success' of these management-led efforts may vary (McCabe, 2011; Reay et al., 2013; Zbaracki, 1998), studies often suggest major (un)intended organisation-level implications.

Second, prior studies have significantly advanced our conceptualisation of the *nature and direction of agency* in the way concepts get translated in the local interaction of the organisational context. Much emphasis is on the concerted efforts and conscious micro-level actions of relevant actors to promote the value of an idea, facilitate the development of meanings and support its overall institutionalisation (for an overview, see Radaelli and Sitton-Kent, 2016). For instance, using an activity-based view, Reay and colleagues relate organisational implementation of management ideas to the managers' engagement in 'micro-level theorizing, encouraging people at the front line to try the new practice and facilitating meaning-making' (2013: 985–6). Theorists have also emphasised that activities aimed at gaining widespread intra-organisational support for particular ideas are certainly not sufficient for, and even potentially at odds with, the likelihood of institutionalisation (Gondo and Amis, 2013; Reay et al., 2013). Moreover, extant research on implementation indicates that agency is primarily aimed at enhancing the translation of ideas from 'the broad policy level into a set of specific practices' (Morris and Lancaster, 2006: 207). In other words, a central concern in most studies is on how and why 'higher-level meanings are continually refined and modified as they are moved to lower levels' (Reay et al., 2013: 983; see also Zilber, 2006). This may be a consequence of, or a reason for, the primary focus on the micro-level activities in relation to more systemic change programmes that are generally associated with 'mobilizing change at the level of the firm' (Morris and Lancaster, 2006: 215).

Third, and related to the previous point, research on management ideas has also shed important light on the *position and positioning of the key agents* in terms of their responses towards particular ideas in processes of organisational implementation (van Grinsven et al., 2020). Although research varies in the agency that is attributed to different relevant actors (van Grinsven et al., 2016), the primary focus of most studies of implementation is on actors at the managerial level as the assumed main starting point for the organisational use of management ideas (Ansari et al., 2014; Canato and Ravasi, 2013; Huising, 2016; Reay et al., 2013; Spyridonidis and Currie, 2016). Higher-level managers are generally portrayed as key initiators of processes of organisational use of these ideas which then – to various degrees – cascade downwards to other

members in an organisation (see Heyden et al., 2017; Knight and Paroutis, 2016; Thomas et al., 2011).

Whilst those in managerial roles are generally considered to be supportive of formally adopting particular management ideas, others often receive a 'recipient' status. Organisational research has emphasised various implementation dynamics as these managerial actors may be confronted with large varieties of attitudes and related responses from other organisational members (Kelemen, 2000; McCabe, 2011; McDermott et al., 2013; Sturdy, 1997, 1998). Indeed, other initiatives to use management ideas, particularly from people in subordinate positions, tend to be less visible in extant studies (Cassell et al., 2017), or, particularly from managerialist perspectives, are easily considered as illegitimate because they do not 'fit' the official managerial interpretation of the idea (e.g. Ansari et al., 2014). For instance, Fiss and colleagues suggested that in the implementation of ideas, the (senior) management of an organisation tends to be: 'promoting wanted variation on the one hand and suppressing unwanted variation on the other' (2012: 1095). In particular, studies of organisational implementation tend to classify these responses by organisational members into relatively stable recipient categories according to their congruency with, or deviation from, the managerial interpretation, including: (1) positive responses (e.g. 'embracement', 'commitment', 'enthusiasm', 'full and true adoption', 'outspoken proponent' and 'adding to initiatives'), (2) unfavourable or negative responses (e.g. 'rejection', 'resistance', 'avoidance' and 'detachment'), and (3) various partial, or even contradictory, forms of conformity (e.g. 'behavioral compliance', 'assent adoption', 'lip service', 'low-dosage adaptation', 'ambivalence' and 'ceremonial integration') (terms in parentheses used within the studies of Ansari, Fiss and Zajac, 2010; Boiral, 2003; Jackall, 1988; Kelemen, 2000; Kostova and Roth, 2002; McCabe, 2011; McDermott, Fitzgerald and Buchanan, 2013; Peccei and Rosenthal, 2000; Sturdy, 1997, 1998; Watson, 1994).

Rethinking Scope and Agency in Researching Impact: A Critique

Prior work in these two broad areas of study provided powerful explanations of the attractiveness and popularisation of certain management ideas amongst managers and organisations, and has shed important light on how these ideas are translated into management and organisational practice. Yet, we still know little about *how management practitioners come to use management ideas in different relevant contexts in their working lives*. Rather, most studies on diffusion end their analysis with the

organisational adoption of a new idea (e.g. Strang, 2010), whereas studies on the organisational implementation have more or less treated the widespread attraction and (organisational) adoption of these ideas as a given, and as a starting point for exploring how these are translated into practice (e.g. Morris and Lancaster, 2006; Mueller and Whittle, 2011; van Grinsven et al., 2020).

Given that (macro-level) analyses of diffusion tend to 'end' with adoption, and those on (micro-level) implementation take this as their starting point, the literature on the impact of management ideas may leave critical aspects related to adoption largely obscured from view. In line with this, Huising concluded that: 'The managerial work of adoption requires being a part of and moving between macro and micro realms to transform universal prescriptions into activities that can be implemented in a particular organisation. This work has been given short shrift in organizational theory' (2016: 384). As indicated by Figure 1.1, adoption can thus be seen as a 'hinge' – a pivot point of potential exchange between research on diffusion and implementation and, as such, as a starting point to unfold their currently fragmented and incomplete views on the impact of management ideas.

The lack of connection between these broad streams on diffusion and implementation and the limited understanding of processes of adoption is a critical shortcoming in the extant literature. As such, it may not only stand in the way of a fruitful dialogue, but may, in the light of the broader
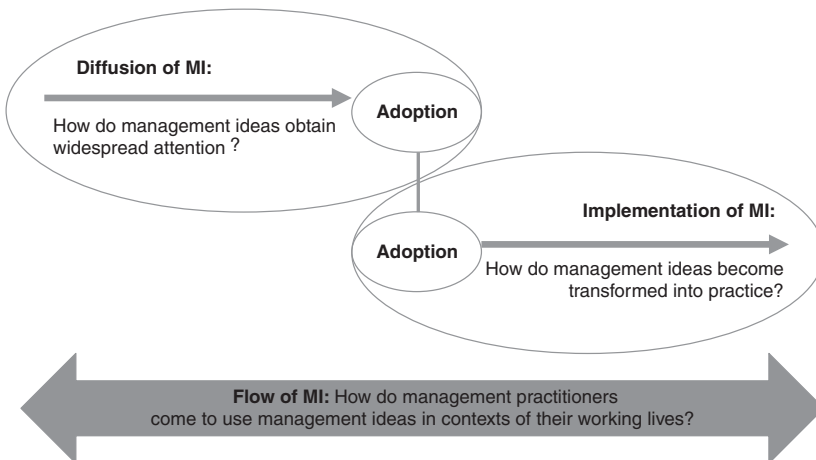

Figure 1.1 Main areas of research

flow of ideas, also leave critical aspects concerning scope and agentic meaning making under-conceptualised.

First, by its main focus on the population-level adoption of management ideas there has been limited consideration of how meanings of potential adopters are shaped outside the specific realm of diffusion. In particular, responses are generally put in terms of adoption and non-adoption, with limited consideration of the adoption decision as this is generally where analyses end. Adoption tends to be seen and measured as the decision to fully use an idea and non-adoption is framed as rejection altogether (e.g. David and Strang, 2006). As such, the prior diffusion literature provides little detail on the agentic meaning making of relevant actors in their adoption of ideas. Given the inter-organisational focus of most diffusion research, the potential variety of responses towards ideas and those who are promoting them – a central element in studies of organisational implementation – is remarkably absent. As Strang noted in his elaborate study on benchmarking: 'the sophistication of diffusion research, in short, often comes at the price of limited contact with the *actions* that the models are supposed to represent' (2010: 11, emphasis added). Rather, the relatively mechanistic or reactive portrayal of managers and organisations that willingly adopt management ideas to resolve common and apparently pressing problems is at variance with their image of being *active agents* in research focusing on the organisational implementation of these ideas. Furthermore, the primary emphasis on the promotion of management ideas in studies of diffusion is also notable given that studies of implementation have conceptualised these processes not as sufficient conditions or even at odds with conditions that enhance the likelihood of implementation. Or in the words of Gondo and Amis: 'the discourse required for effective implementation is less conceptually and more practically oriented and requires wide participation by those affected' (2013: 240). Building on this, there is a need to view management practitioners in the context of diffusion more as 'independent and active' meaning makers.

Second, and in contrast, by focusing primarily on those with a favourable attitude in management roles and their agency in shaping the translation of ideas into organisational practice, prior micro-level studies may develop a limited view on the use of management ideas beyond formal management-induced implementation initiatives. Indeed, a main focus on organisations as 'the' setting for using management ideas avoids essential understandings of relevant relationships and different forms of use outside this specific context (cf. Hancock and Tyler, 2019), which may ultimately feed back and shape processes of diffusion and use. For instance, from their review of the literature,

Radaelli and Sitton-Kent concluded a lack of adequate theorising of how management practitioners may act as carriers of management ideas and 'assimilate and organize these inputs' (2016: 317). Rather, most implementation studies relate the organisational adoption of ideas only to some conformity pressures without developing a detailed view on the wide variety of settings in which processes of management idea 'adoption' may occur. Given the organisational focus of most implementation research, the widespread attraction and subsequent decisions for organisational adoption – central elements in studies of diffusion – are considered as a given, and taken as a starting point for exploring how these are translated into practice. In doing so, this stream of literature has also offered little detail on the agentic meaning making of relevant actors in relevant contexts beyond the point of formal organisational adoption of ideas. As Huising concluded: 'Beyond observing managers as change agents in particular organizations, we need to understand their relationship to extra-local communities. Membership in these communities influences the meanings that managers attach to their work, thereby affecting how they do this work' (2016: 387).

In addition, a primary focus on (top) management activities in the literature on implementation is highly remarkable given the likely exposure of a multitude of organisational members to the macro-level promotion of management ideas. Indeed, Clark and Greatbatch (2004) have emphasised that management gurus' lectures attract an essentially differentiated audience of practitioners. In addition, given the ubiquity of new forms of mass media, it can be assumed that more management practitioners have access to the ideas of these gurus (cf. Piazza and Abrahamson, 2020). However, in the current literature on implementation most of these practitioners are obscured from view or receive only a secondary role as recipients of ideas from top managers, viewing their responses in terms of their adherence or deviance from a managerial interpretation.

Overall, we find that, in the light of the broader flow of management ideas, the extant streams of literature on diffusion and implementation both apply relatively narrow scopes with respect to the local-extra-local relationships involved in the adoption decision, and have each paid limited attention to the agentic meaning making related to the adoption dynamics. In other words, prior work on the impact of management ideas has considered only parts of the broader flow of these ideas, leaving under-conceptualised critical aspects concerning *scope and agency*. As such, this book argues that a broader, more differentiated and dynamic view of how management practitioners come to use management ideas throughout different relevant contexts of their

working lives is necessary to deepen our understanding of the complexities concerning their impact on management and organisational practice and beyond (cf. Sturdy, 2011).

Management Practitioners as Audience Members

In response to these challenges in researching the impact of management ideas, our focus is on studying *management practitioners as audience members*. Managerial audience members are important, albeit largely unappreciated, carriers of management ideas (Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall, 2002; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2001). In particular, and as suggested above, they may not only bring particular ideas to their work environment, but may also shape other actors' attitudes to these ideas during processes of organisational implementation, and may enhance or impede receptivity to ideas when these are being 'sold' by other knowledge entrepreneurs such as consultants (e.g. Sturdy, 1997). For instance, Engwall and Wedlin posited that if business graduates are put in a role as consultants they might become 'significant missionaries of management ideas, both those learnt during their business studies and those they have picked up from their employers and clients' (2019: 163). Yet, such a potentially far-reaching, albeit complex area of influence has received little detailed analysis in the present literature on management ideas. We argue in this section that, in the light of the broader flow of ideas, there are important reasons for advancing a conceptualisation of managerial audiences not the least because it offers important possibilities for studying the complexities concerning how the impact of management ideas becomes apparent and is mediated throughout different relevant contexts (cf. Sturdy, 2011).

First, as explained below, the growth in MBA programmes and other forms of management education (Engwall et al., 2016), the increased sales of management books and the emergence of social media platforms particularly targeted at management practitioners provides concrete evidence of managers increasingly being put in the role of *audience member* (Barros and Ruling, 2019; Piazza and Abrahamson, 2020). Indeed, a substantial proportion of today's managers have received some form of management education either by following a regular (under)graduate programme in management and/or organisation studies at a business school, or by following executive programmes within a university or a private training institution (Engwall and Wedlin, 2019). Also, it has become much more common for management practitioners to attend lectures or watch videos of management thinkers that may or may not have obtained a guru status (Greatbatch and Clark, 2005; Sahlin-Andersson and

Engwall, 2002; Sturdy et al., 2019). For instance, Radaelli and Sitton-Kent (2016) found that processes of idea acquisition by management practitioners also entailed: 'formal and extended occasions such as meetings, workshops or seminars to informal chats, gossiping and rumors with peers [...] or brief contacts with top management' (p. 316).

Moreover, we learn from Pagel and Westerfelhaus (2005) that the sales of management books – traditionally one of the most recognised carriers of management ideas – has shown a substantial growth during the last thirty years or so. They refer to statistics that show that in the early 1990s 1,421 books in the category 'Business and Economics' were published representing a turnover of about 500 million dollars. Only ten years later the number of new titles increased to 5,023 and the turnover to almost a billion dollars. Such an increase in market size would suggest that the managerial ideas carried by these books continue to appeal to a large managerial audience. Also, recent figures from the *Library and Book Trade Almanac*, published in the years 1998, 2005, 2008, 2010, 2013, 2015 and 2018 indicate a relatively stable – after substantial growth in the first decade of this millennium – and large market (see Table 1.2), which is generally consistent with developments in overall US book production. Out of fifty-one categories, 'Business and Economics' is ranked fourth in terms of yearly US book title output (after the categories 'Children', 'Family and Relationships' and 'Health and Fitness') (Bogart, 2018: 395). Also indicative of the current size of the market for management knowledge is that the number of North American (US and Canada) academic textbooks, published or distributed in the year 2017, the category 'Business and Economics' is even ranked second (after the category 'Medicine') (Bogart, 2018: 366–7).

Relatedly, Barros and Rüling signal that management practitioners are increasingly attracted to internet-driven social media platforms such as LinkedIn, Facebook and YouTube that allow for the creation of sites

Table 1.2 *US book title output in the category 'Business and Economics'*

Year	Number of all titles	Including audiobooks	e-books
1997 (Bogart, 1998: 522)	1,788	–	–
2002 (Bogart, 2005: 521)	5,028	–	–
2007 (Bogart, 2008: 536; Bogart, 2010: 494)	12,815	295	–
2012 (Bogart, 2013: 446–8; Bogart, 2015: 455)	13,811	465	11.296
2017 (Bogart, 2018: 395–406)	12,103	870	6.463

'where management ideas and practices can be presented, debated, and disseminated' (2019: 208). This may include guru and management thinkers' lectures – both whole lectures and clips from lectures such as organised via YouTube or the TED Talks channel. For instance, amongst the most popular TED Talks on management and leadership (August 2020) are Simon Sinek – more than 51 million views (TED, 2009), Rosaline Torres – more than 5.3 million views (TED, 2013), and Tim Harford – more than 2 million views (TED, 2011). Some management thinkers have their own YouTube channel and website including links to training videos, presentation slides, blogs and columns (see for example tompeters.com). Theorists note that these 'new' media tend to give a potentially larger group of management practitioners immediate access to a variety of ideas from different sources. In addition, these media may respond quicker to 'new' developments, and better allow for different forms of interaction (cf. Piazza and Abrahamson, 2020). Madsen even emphasised that: 'the new digital era that is upon us has many implications for the study of management ideas' (2020: 3). Thus, prior work has shown that *management practitioners are audience members in a large number of different contexts*. Arguably, given the presence and apparent popularity of different forms of new mass media primarily targeted at management practitioners, *being an audience member is an essential part of the contemporary managerial role*. As such, developing an adequate understanding of the role of managerial audiences in the flow of management ideas is not only of significance for organisations and the broader society, but also for the field of management as a whole as it requires us to rethink the conceptualisation of management occupations and managerial work to one that includes a role as audience member both within and beyond mass communication settings.

Second, theoretically, mass communication research emphasises the importance of accounting for the complexities of audiences in discussions on the impact of media messages. As Abercrombie and Longhurst have stressed in their overview, despite the omnipresence of mass media in contemporary societies, many of the approaches that are apparent in discussions of the possible impact of mass media tend to be 'seriously misplaced' (1998: 1), and require at least a much more nuanced and critical understanding of audiences particularly as a temporal and situated role (see also Butsch, 2008; Sullivan, 2013). In the context of management ideas, research on media audiences offers critical insight into how messages are mediated in different stages of the communication process. Central to the media research tradition that we follow in our analysis is the individual audience members' own activities and related meaning making of mass media prior to, during and after exposure (Rubin, 2009). In other

words, to understand the possible impact of management ideas, we focus primarily on what audience members do with mass media in terms of their motives for using particular media in relation to different relevant contexts.

In the light of the broader flow of ideas across different contexts (Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall, 2002), the concept of managerial audience contributes to our understanding of the complexities related to studying the impact of management ideas. In particular, viewing management practitioners as audience members allows us to address our research question as it contributes to further exploring:

- why managerial audience members are open to particular management ideas in the contexts of mass communication events,
- how these ideas are filtered and critically appraised via a primarily differentiated audience and
- how this filtering may subsequently become apparent in the use of ideas in different social and situational contexts.

Structure of the Book

This book can be placed against the background of longstanding debates on the potential impact of management ideas on management and organisational practice. It is particularly concerned with the need to develop a more advanced understanding of *management practitioners as audience members* given their critical role in the flow of these ideas between different contexts (cf. Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall, 2002). For this purpose, it examines how these managerial audience members come to use management ideas in relation to different relevant contexts of their working lives. Based on analyses of audiences in relation to management guru lectures, the book argues that a more informed view of the managerial audience's activities and related meaning making of ideas is necessary if we want to further our insight into important complexities in understanding the broader impact of management ideas as well as on the nature of contemporary managerial work. The book is organised as follows.

Chapter 2 develops an integrated conception of audiences by drawing on three central approaches to audiences in the social sciences. In particular, we will consider: (1) research in the field of conversation analysis which is concerned with understanding the way lectures and speeches may influence and transform audiences and in turn, how audience responses may affect speakers' oratorical performances, (2) the 'uses and gratification' approach to studying media audiences which focuses primarily on the reasons and motivations for selecting specific media options and the way various audience activities relate to the nature of

audience orientations, (3) more critical traditions of media research focusing on how audience members' interpretations of media messages relate to their social backgrounds and (4) literature on fans and fandom which provides an important lens to advance understanding of how and to what extent audience members take the ideas beyond a mass communication setting and may even become producers themselves. This provides the basis for a more detailed and nuanced conceptualisation of the managerial audience and how they perceive and use the mass communication events.

Chapters 3 and 4 examine the way the interactions between speaker and members of the audience may enhance or inhibit the flow of ideas beyond a mass communication setting. In particular, we look at the way gurus seek to create a *positive atmosphere* by promoting affiliative responses and limiting disaffiliative responses (Chapter 3). We also analyse how gurus present their ideas in ways which convincingly demonstrate that these ideas are potentially applicable to the variety of working lives of those who attend (Chapter 4). As such, these chapters shed more light on the conditions that may enhance the possibility that the management ideas that are promoted during the lectures leave the auditorium with audience members that are willing to use them in an organisational context or in other instances.

Chapters 5 and 6 analyse specific differences that exist between audience members in their orientations towards the ideas that have been conveyed beyond mass communication settings. Drawing on our study of management practitioners attending guru events we identify four *central audience orientations* (devoted, engaged, non-committal and critical) and explain their key characteristics, related audience activities and underlying rationales (Chapter 5). In addition, we consider how and why the development of these orientations may vary by elaborating on three forms of *shifts of consumption* (involvement-induced, utility-induced and alternating) that occur amongst audience members (Chapter 6). Overall, we stress that the identification of various shifts in individual consumption orientation indicates the need for a more fluid, conditional and variable understanding of management practitioners' responses towards management ideas.

Chapters 7 and 8 move our study beyond the mass communication setting within which management ideas are conveyed as we focus on the critical social and situational contexts of idea use. We consider how, within an organisational context, the flow of management ideas is related to the recursive deployment and reconstitution of three different forms of power (influence, force and domination), and how different directions of agency may relate to the relative power positions individual audience

members may hold towards their assumed targets as they address subordinates (downward), peers (lateral) and superiors (upward) (Chapter 7). Also, we look at the different ways in which management practitioners *extend* their involvement with mass media and communicate management ideas. In particular we explore how audience members may engage in different forms of fan involvement (i.e. exaltation, socialisation and marketisation), each having a specific bearing on the way they construct themselves, the management ideas and related artefacts associated with a guru event. As such we further our insight into the way audience members can become 'productive' in various analytically distinct ways, and how these are associated with specific imaginary communities that act as points of reference beyond the scope of a specific organisation (Chapter 8). These two chapters are particularly focused on understanding how and to what extent audience members can be considered co-producers in and of themselves.

In Chapter 9 we conclude our analysis with an overview of our findings and implications for future research on the impact of management ideas as well as on the nature of contemporary managerial work.