

Performative seduction: how management consultants influence practices of leadership

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper tracks how a policy recommended by management consultants becomes embedded as an integral part of leadership practice. It explores the launch of the concept of “talent management” by McKinsey & Company and how it becomes adopted as part of expected leadership practices in the English National Health Service. The use of Management Consultants globally has increased exponentially, and the paper considers this phenomenon and the ways in which management consultant advice influences public sector leadership and practice at local level.

Design/methodology/approach – A case study approach is adopted, focussing on the introduction of the concept of talent management into the English NHS, following the wider emergence of the concept through influential reports published by McKinsey & Company in the late 1990s. An analysis of the emergence of the concept is conducted drawing on this series of reports and the adoption of talent management policies and practices by the English government’s Department of Health.

Findings – These influential reports by the management consultancy firm, McKinsey & Company, constituted an urgent need for this newly identified concept of talent management and the secrecy surrounding its reception. It is this mystery surrounding the decisions about a talent management strategy in the NHS and the concealment of decisions behind closed doors, which leads us to offer a theory of management consultants’ influence on leaders as one of performative seduction.

Originality/value – Management consultancy is a vast business whose influence reaches deeply into public and private sector organisations around the world. Understanding of the variegated policies and practices that constitute contemporary modes of governance therefore requires comprehension of management consultants’ role within those policies and practices. This paper argues that management consultants influence public sector leadership through insertion of their products into definitions of, and performative constitution of, local level leadership.

Keywords Talent management, Judith Butler, Management consultants, Performative seduction

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Management consultancy is a vast business whose influence reaches deeply into public and private sector organisations globally. Understanding the constitution of contemporary modes of governance therefore requires understanding of management consultants’ (MCs) role within those policies and practices. This paper argues that MCs influence public sector leadership through insertion of their products into the performative constitution of local level leadership. That is, they influence leadership not only as practice or process but also the individuals who exert power as leaders. We use a case study approach, focusing on one particular aspect of leadership, talent management. Although now ubiquitous in organisations as a major aspect of human resource management responsibilities (Alziari, 2017; Boudreau and Rice, 2015; CIPD, 2020), talent management was unknown in organisations before the late 1990s. It is now integral to leadership in two ways: as a task (good leadership involves nurturing followers’ talents) and as a descriptor (good leaders are talented). Given that this key aspect of leaders’ responsibilities emerged and became institutionalised within public sector organisations in less than 25 years (Galardo-Galardo



et al., 2020; Meyers *et al.*, 2020; McDonnell *et al.*, 2017; Sparrow, 2019), it lends itself to understanding MCs as important, but secretive, constitutors of public sector leadership and governance. We analyse its emergence in reports published by McKinsey & Company, its growth in the first decade of the twenty-first century, and secrecy surrounding its reception by the English government's Department of Health. We develop a theory of performative seduction to explain their influence.

Management consultants

Originating in the USA before World War Two, management consultancy is now a global industry (Clark, 1995; Clark and Salaman, 1996; Kirkpatrick *et al.*, 2019; O'Mahoney, 2010). Its income grew by 10,000% between 1980 and 2008, from circa \$3bn to \$330bn (O'Mahoney, 2010, p. 2). Between 1998 and 2007 European turnover tripled from 24.7 to 82.9 billion euros (Mohe and Seidl, 2011), continuing to rise through the 2008 recession (FEACO, 2010). Demand for MC advice by public sector organisations (Kirkpatrick *et al.*, 2019; O'Mahoney, 2010; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2001) and governments (O'Mahoney, 2010) has grown exponentially (Kirkpatrick *et al.*, 2019). The UK's MC industry grew by 7% in 2018, exceeding £10 billion for the first time (<https://www.consultancy.uk/news/21867/uk-management-consulting-industry-grows-7-to-106-billion>), with NHS yearly expenditure on MCs increasing from £313m in 2010 to £640m in 2014 (Oliver, 2016). The UK public sector is a major consumer, with Defence, Central Government and the NHS respectively accounting for 28%, 26% and 14% of total consulting fees in the UK (MCA, 2016). In the United States MC is the fastest growing occupation. Staff numbers were projected to increase by 24% between 2008 and 2018 (Bureau of Labour Statistics, 2010–11), and a further 14% from 2018–2028 (Bureau of Labour Statistics, 2019, <https://www.bls.gov/OOH/business-and-financial/management-analysts.htm>). There is concern, in 2020, at the current government's reliance on MCs to advise on and deliver services during the COVID-19 pandemic [1].

Despite MCs' considerable influence (Abrahamson, 1991, 1996; Abrahamson and Eisenman, 2001; Huczynski, 1993; Kirkpatrick *et al.*, 2019; Saint-Martin, 2004; Sturdy, 2009), there is a paucity of empirical studies into their work (Heusinkveld *et al.*, 2011; Saint-Martin, 2012; Kirkpatrick *et al.*, 2019), and little evidence, beyond MCs' own rhetoric, of their impact (Alvesson, 1993; Benders and Van Veen, 2001; Fincham and Roslender, 2004; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2001). Controversy surrounds MC's influence (Kirkpatrick *et al.*, 2019). Their integrity (O'Mahoney, 2010) and effectiveness is questioned, with varied levels of reported success from multi-billion dollar contracts (Saint-Martin, 2004, 2012) [2], and they are blamed for the failure of the UK's Test and Trace activities during the 2020 global pandemic. There is no statistical association between expenditure on MCs and improvements in efficiency in the NHS more generally (Kirkpatrick *et al.*, 2019, p. 90). Despite longstanding concerns about their escalating costs (NAO, 2006; Oliver, 2016) they seem impervious to critique. Efforts to reduce their influence in the UK public sector between 2000 and 2010 failed: they continued to win major contracts, many of them shrouded in secrecy, practices that continue in the COVID-19 crisis.

Studies suggest irrational factors make MCs' services irresistible. They provide a sense of security to senior managers who over-ride failure to improve performance (Clark and Salaman, 1998) and have been described as like "missionaries, charged not with religious but with corporate fervour" (O'Mahoney, 2010, p. 4), influencing beliefs rather than practices. Abrahamson's seminal paper (1996, p. 257) identified MCs as major actors in promoting management fashions, depicted as "relatively transitory collective belief[s]". There appears little that is rational or logical about MCs' work (Abrahamson, 1996; Clark, 1995; Clark and Salaman, 1996; Collins, 2000, 2004; Kieser, 1997, 2002; Newell *et al.*, 2001; O'Shea and Madigan, 1998. See also Kirkpatrick *et al.*, 2019).

This paper explores why, despite such evidence, MCs thrive. We argue they achieve what we call “seductive performativity”. In brief MCs devise a topic that can be turned into a product; they seduce senior management; senior management requires middle management to turn abstract concept into material practice.

Our theoretical location is Judith Butler’s theory of performativity that illuminates how words not only describe but also construct or constitute meaning, identities and practices (Butler, 1990, 1993). Where J.L. Austin had influentially argued that words “do things”, such as the statement in court “I pronounce you guilty and sentence you to jail” sends a criminal into custody, Butler (1997, p. 28) argues that “the subject who speaks is also constituted by the language that she or he speaks, [so] language is the condition of possibility for the speaking subject, and not merely its instrument of expression” (Butler, 1997, p. 28). Put very simply, the judge is constituted as judge through pronouncement of judgement. We extend Butler’s arguments to explore the seductive allure of rhetorical practices, studying the process of seductive performativity through two stages: constitution of the product and translation into practice.

This study’s methodology uses discourse analysis (Wetherell *et al.*, 2001). That is, we undertook a line-by-line analysis of the language within a series of reports on talent management published by McKinsey & Co. Methodologically, this study involved in-depth sentence-by-sentence analysis of the language in those reports. We analysed the metaphors used, the binary opposites that make certain concepts sayable, and how language was used to constitute talent management as a product that managers should purchase. The texts analysed are those on talent management published by staff of McKinsey & Co., primarily Chambers *et al.* (1998); Axelrod *et al.* (2001); Michaels *et al.* (2001), and Guthridge *et al.* (2008).

This analysis led to recognition of two stages in the constitution of talent management as a leadership function: forming the product and seducing the purchaser.

Stage one: the performative constitution of the product

In 1998 *The McKinsey Quarterly* published a paper by a team of its consultants entitled “*The War for Talent*” (Chambers *et al.*, 1998). At this time talent was not equated with management but with arts and sport. Although the word “talent” was widely used from 1800, the term “talent management” does not seem to exist until the very late 1990s and then, as Table 1 shows, the usage rises exponentially as the term quickly becomes popularised.

By 2009 one-third (36%) of the UK’s larger organisations (5000+ employees) had some talent development activities (CIPD, 2009), and by 2020 over half of CEOs prioritised it (CIPD, 2020). The term “Talent” has become understood as the person who possesses talents rather than the skills and abilities they excel in. In relation to managerial positions, talent has been presented as: “A code for the most effective leaders and managers at all levels who can help a company fulfil its aspirations and drive its performance. Managerial talent is some combination of a sharp strategic mind, leadership ability, emotional maturity, communications skills, the ability to attract and inspire other talented people, entrepreneurial instincts, functional skills, and the ability to deliver results” (Michaels

Google Ngram showing increasing use of the term “talent management”

Time period	Number
1980–1989	44
1990–1999	254
2000–2009	7220
2010–2020	19100

Table 1.
Google Ngram on
talent management

et al., 2001, p. xiii). So “talent” can be seen to refer to those limited number of people who possess the highest quality of managerial and leadership skills.

Talent management refers to ensuring that these people are identified or recruited, developed and retained, in such a way that their outstanding contribution can be fully achieved. It has been defined as: “. . .the systematic attraction, identification, development, engagement/retention and deployment of those individuals with high potential who are of particular value to an organisation” (CIPD, 2008, p. 7).

Now, some writers refer to talent management as a fad, as the latest set of management buzzwords, and dismiss the concepts. Others, more in line with the thinking of the Department of Health (as we explore later in the paper), accept David Guest’s argument (cited in Warren, 2006, p. 29) that talent management is “an idea that has been around for a long time. It has been relabelled and that enables wise organisations to review what they are doing. It integrates some old ideas and gives them a freshness and that is good”.

Some of the older ideas that have been incorporated into notions of talent include elements from recruitment and retention strategies through career development, workforce planning, succession planning and leadership development initiatives (Ford *et al.*, 2010). What is significant in these debates on talent is that its increasing use by practitioners and academics has surfaced following the publication of the McKinsey & Company reports.

How did a series of reports by McKinsey & Company cause such a rapid rise of a concept? Firstly, the rhetoric of the McKinsey reports is performative. It was launched into a managerial milieu in 1998 in a paper (Chambers *et al.*, 1998) that claimed empirical evidence of a “war for talent” involving aggressive competition between companies to recruit and retain the most talented. Talent was defined very differently from its use in arts and sports, as “some combination of a sharp strategic mind, leadership ability, emotional maturity, communication skills, the ability to attract and inspire other talented people, entrepreneurial instincts, functional skills and the ability to deliver results” (Michaels *et al.*, 2001, p. xiii, a book published by McKinsey staff in 2001). However, the book’s preface was less certain in its definition, acknowledging that: “A certain part of talent eludes description: you simply know it when you see it” (p. xii).

“*The War for Talent*” (Chambers *et al.*, 1998) repays close textual reading. It begins “Better talent is worth fighting for” (p. 45): note metaphors of battle here and in its title. Such metaphors recur throughout, issuing an urgent call to arms. This statement is followed (p. 46) with a description of the enormous study on which this conclusion is based: warfare is joined by science. Readers are told that 77 of the USA’s major corporations, involving 359 respondents, were surveyed. Their “top 200 staff” were “talked to”, i.e. 5,679 staff. A further 72 “senior HR executives” were questioned, 12 academics interviewed and 20 case studies undertaken. To an academic readership the lack of information about research methods is concerning. A non-academic audience however is presented with a simulacrum of a major study, assuring readers that the “war for talent” is based on scientifically sound evidence from “major” corporations.

The rhetoric shifts from science back to warfare. Note how, in this opening section, the report instils a sense of weakness. The study’s findings:

should be a call to arms for corporate America. Companies are about to be engaged in a war for senior executive talent that will remain a defining characteristic of their competitive landscape for decades to come. Yet most are ill-prepared, and even the best are vulnerable (Chambers *et al.*, 1998, p. 46).

Research methods are not discussed but there are hints that a survey using a Likert-type scale was used: “Thirty-one per cent of HR directors at top quintile companies strongly agree that they are always looking for great talent and bring it in whenever they find it, compared to 9 per cent at mid-quintile companies” (Chambers *et al.*, 1998, p. 54). This implies participants were commenting on a question that asked “How much do you agree with the following question: ‘This company is always looking for great talent and brings it in whenever it finds

it' Strongly agree, agree, disagree". There are three problems here. First, the survey seems to set out to prove what it wants to prove. Secondly, the study itself introduces the concept of "talent" to organisations. Notice, thirdly, an immediate reification – living, breathing human beings become an object, "the talent".

There are many direct quotes from named chief executives and senior managers. For example, "Leaders with a talent mindset share AlliedSignal CEO Larry Bossidy's conviction that 'At the end of the day, we bet on people, not strategies'" (p. 48). This both introduces a new capability – possession of "a talent mindset" – and elides it with a seemingly unrelated quotation. It is often difficult to find which parts of the research lead to the different results reported. The report is thus a curious mix of aspirations to scientific status (the numbers involved in the study), fear-inducing rhetoric, cosy, home-spun wisdom and the construction of a new skill (the ability to recruit "the talent"). This rhetoric encourages a strong reaction in readers.

Three years later [Axelrod et al. \(2001\)](#) updated the 1998 study and reported that the "war for talent" was "escalating" (p. 9). Note the urgency of such rhetoric. It is easier now to see use of a Likert-type scale. Participants rated statements about how an underperforming boss had affected them. Statements include "prevented me from learning" (76% somewhat or strongly agree); "hurt my career development" (81%); "prevented me from making a larger contribution to the bottom line" (82%); and "made me want to leave the company" (86%) ([Axelrod et al., 2001](#), p. 11). Look at how these forced-choice questions again set out to prove what the authors require proved.

A related book ([Michaels et al., 2001](#)) claimed that 13,000 managers at 112 large US corporations had been surveyed. The study, updated again in 2006 and 2007, argued the shortage of talent "remains acute – and if anything has become worse" with talent shortage now "a global trend" ([Guthridge et al., 2008](#), p. 53). Again note how the rhetoric escalates feelings of urgency but also of weakness – this issue is now gargantuan, so how can an individual corporation tackle it without support and guidance? Metaphors of warfare and science are augmented with those of Cold War imaginings. The "enemy" is "within" (p. 53), i.e. both within corporations' poor management practices, and within people: "Habits of mind are the real barriers to talent management' one financial services executive confided" (p. 53). Note the anonymity of this quote.

Close reading of the language used in this series of publications illuminates how MCs can *create those very issues for which they claim to possess the solution*:

- (1) A topic is identified whose credibility in other domains allows its transfer to organisations.
- (2) Research is carried out that, to the untrained eye, may appear highly impressive.
- (3) The research contains questions to which the only rational response is agreement – which companies would not be often looking for the best staff available?
- (4) Discursive sleights of hand intervene: without deep thought as to the precise meaning of the term, the sort of thinking not typically carried out when completing surveys ([Mishler, 1991](#); [Galasiński and Kosłowska, 2010](#)) respondents would tick the "agree" or "strongly agree" boxes.
- (5) Not only are the survey questions slanted, the quality of the research more generally is suspect.
- (6) However, unless read with a judgemental eye, these problems would be glossed over by casual readers who might not recognise how spurious are the claims to scientific foundations.

- (7) The new concept can appear credible because “science” has shown it is something already existing within corporations.

In sum, use of the word “talent” in questionnaires designed ostensibly to gauge levels of concern about “talent” has performative effects: “talent” becomes meaningful as an organisational concept. The publications’ *rhetoric* has a libidinal energy (Stiegler, 2011) that arouses fear (metaphors of warfare and vulnerability) and transfers it from the domain of battle to leadership. Proof of the rhetoric’s persuasiveness is seen in the exponential growth of references to “talent management”. Through performativity’s power (words are not merely descriptive but causative): (1) an abstract concept takes on material presence (leaders become “the talent”) that (2) is vitally important and (3) in short supply. The reports’ casual readers, seduced by (spurious) claims to scientific credibility and ensnared by over-heated language rich in metaphors of battle and danger, would find invoked in themselves a panicked response: something must be done.

The reports then calm the disturbed reader: a highly logical, rational and (seemingly) easy to implement solution exists – talent management, on which MCs can advise.

The success of these tactics is undoubted. They introduced terminology now ubiquitous in organisations, thus instigating the very thing they were warning about: organisations competing for “the talent” that is in short supply.

The next stage in the seductive performativity of talent management was its legitimisation by academic support.

Academic legitimising of talent management

A brief hiatus followed publication of “*The War for Talent*” in 1997 before academic interest grew, but publications mushroomed from around 2005. Table 2 shows results of a Scopus search using the search term “talent” AND “management”, limited to “articles”, on 26th June 2020. This shows how the concept became “seeded” and grew in academia.

There was a particularly marked increase in 2018 and 2019: 738 papers were published in these two years, compared with the 775 published in the 54 years from 1950–2004.

Academy journal papers in the first decade of the century attempted to define talent (e.g. Barlow, 2006; Cairns, 2009; Garrow and Hirsh, 2009; Hirsh, 2009; Tansley *et al.*, 2006), and then prescribe how talent management should be practised (Cappelli, 2008). It was argued that it required a strategy and accompanying set of practices (Cook and Macaulay, 2009) that should be future oriented, integrated and have measurable outcomes (Haskins and Shaffer, 2010). It should be a major HR responsibility, incorporating recruitment, selection, performance management, succession planning, professional development, diversity and culture (Cairns, 2009). The boundaries between HR and talent management blurred (Hirsh, 2009; Garrow and Hirsh, 2009). It should be future focussed (Hirsh, 2009) and look

Date range	No. of articles
1950–1979	104
1980–1984	60
1985–1989	74
1990–1994	91
1995–1999	136
2000–2004	310
2005–2009	656
2010–2014	1050
2015–2019	1509

Table 2.
Articles on “talent
management”
published between
1950 and 2019

simultaneously at micro (individual) and meso (organisation) levels. By the decade's end two contrasting approaches had developed: exclusive, focusing on small numbers of the most talented staff; and inclusive, aiming to bring out the talents of all staff. Most companies preferred the former, more exclusive approach (CIPD, 2009). When organisations refer to talent in this more exclusive sense, they tend to refer to those staff with leadership potential who are marked out for career progression and further investment through leadership development initiatives, many of which have more recently been rebranded as talent development programmes (Ford *et al.*, 2010).

The quality of the research, largely based upon basic, single case study descriptions (Cairns, 2009; CIPD, 2008; Clake and Winkler, 2006; McCartney, 2009; Tansley *et al.*, 2007; Williams-Lee, 2008) was questioned. Concerns about lack of credibility (Lewis and Heckman, 2006) went largely ignored in this decade. The mushrooming academic literature often relied uncritically on MCs' reports and poor quality studies (see, for example, an early special edition of *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management* (Barron, 2008; Baum, 2008; Hughes and Rog, 2007; and Watson, 2007).

Regardless of such limitations, growing academic interest achieved the task, we argue, of *legitimising* talent management as a leadership function. The mere fact of its being studied by social scientists provides a veneer of science through universities' power to define "knowledge" (Foucault, 2002). Indeed, researchers can reify abstract managerial practices. That is, they/we look at the vastly complex and multifarious arena of innumerable material and discursive organisational practices, carve a slice through them and impose a name/meaning on what we have carved out (Chia, 1994). Business school research enacts ontological inception through its privileged possession of epistemological credibility.

In summary, the first stage of the seductive performativity of the term "talent management" involved transfer by MCs of a concept from its customary domains of arts and sport into leadership practices, an infusion of libidinal energy that transferred the energetic adrenalin of fear to the prosaic world of leadership; and legitimisation of the concept by academia.

Stage two: seductive performativity

It remains to explore how this new category of practice becomes inserted into leadership and governance practices within public sector organisations. We focus on England's NHS. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, the period of interest for this study, the NHS employed 1,431,996 staff (2009 figures) and was and still is one of the largest organisations in the world. At the time talent management was introduced, the NHS was split into 14 regional health authorities, each divided into district health authorities, each led by a chief executive officer and senior management team (see Figure 1 for its organisational structure). Although leadership is devolved throughout the NHS it rests, ultimately, with government and the Secretary of State for Health.

Since the 1980s UK governments have been convinced that private sector business management is superior to public management. MCs, seeking to influence political agendas and spending strategies, successfully fostered relationships with politicians and senior public officials (Craig and Brookes, 2006; O'Mahoney, 2010). UK government spending on MCs rose by 1,000% in the decade following publication of *The War for Talent* (IPSOS/MORI, 2007), with estimated spend on their services across the UK public sector increasing by 33% between 2003–2004 and 2005–2006, to £2.8bn, largely due to increased spending by the NHS (National Audit Office, 2006). Their recommendations cost governments hundreds of billions of pounds but levels of success were variable (Saint-Martin, 2004, Saint-Martin *et al.*, 2005). McKinsey & Company had influence within the walls of the Department of Health in the decade in question, having been paid more than £9.2 millions (\$14.57 millions) in fees by the

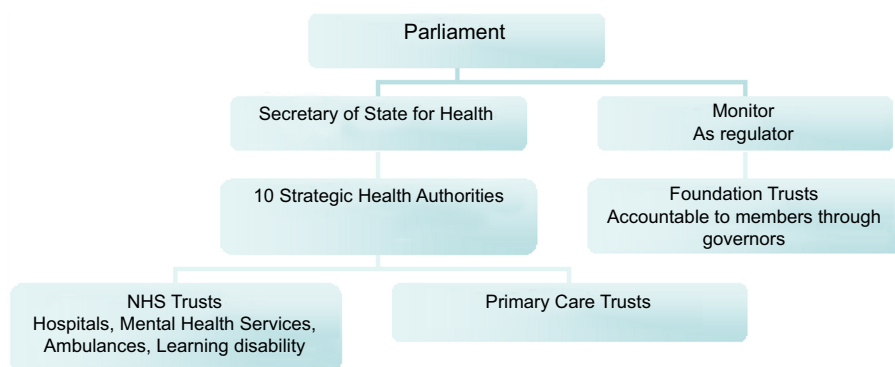


Figure 1.
Structure of the
English NHS at time of
study (2009)

Department of Health in 2009/2010, more than double that paid to any other MC firm (Guardian newspaper, 15th September 2010). In 2011 NHS London was criticised for paying more than £1,250,000 (\$1,979,100) each to three consultancy firms, including McKinsey & Company, to train doctors in management skills that, critics argued, already existed in the NHS (Guardian Newspaper, 12th January 2012).

There is no evidence of whether or not these fees included advice on talent management because, and this is important to the arguments of this paper, what goes on between civil service mandarins and MC firms remains secret. A powerful governmental committee, the House of Commons Health Committee, tried to find out, but was unable to peer behind this particular curtain (House of Commons, 4th June 2009).

So, MCs' influence on governance in the UK public sector was growing exponentially as McKinsey & Company was developing talent management, a concept soon taken up by other MCs. Suddenly, it seems, for there appears to have been no prior consultation, in October 2004 a team was established to address leadership challenges and promote a talent management culture in the NHS (Clake and Winkler, 2006, pp. 8–10). The aims were to “establish an executive talent pipeline that identifies, tracks, develops, positions and retains critical leadership talent within the service” (ibid, p. 8). The Department of Health wrote to Strategic Health Authorities in November 2004 [3] and published national guidelines on “talent and leadership planning”. They charged Strategic Health Authorities and Trust Boards with developing talent and leadership across the NHS in England [4].

In previous papers we have shown the mixed reaction to the strategy by regional and local level senior leaders (Harding *et al.*, 2014, 2017): some voiced resistance, others were beguiled. Resistance often took the form of relabeling pre-existing programmes as “talent management” so the term entered NHS leadership discourses. It continues to resonate. Theories of language's performativity (Butler, 1990, 1993) demonstrate how a term's entry into everyday discourse will actively constitute that of which it speaks. In other words, the NHS became an organisation in which talent management was core to its HR objectives, with energy expended on identifying, developing and retaining “the talent”. Leaders now have to be talented and able to identify others as “the talent”.

There is a mystery at the core of this process, for what is *not* known is how and why the Department of Health (DoH) was persuaded of the value of a talent management strategy – this remains utterly opaque. Evidence regarding McKinsey & Company's influence is circumstantial – the firm was a major source of management consultancy advice to the DoH at the time, but it cannot be said for certain that they introduced the policy. Nothing is known about what fees, if any, were paid for advice about talent management, only that very large sums of money flowed from the DoH to McKinsey & Company between 2000 and 2010.

As noted above, even a powerful House of Commons Select Committee could not discover what happens between MCs, elected representatives and civil servants behind closed doors. But *The War for Talent* and subsequent reports, we suggest, hold the secret to what went on behind those doors: a process of seduction.

Discussion: the seductive performativity of MCs' nostrums

Wikipedia defines seduction as “the process of deliberately enticing a person to engage in a relationship, to lead astray, as from duty, rectitude, or the like . . . [5]. In other words, the seductor gains power over the seducted who then submits to the seductor's desires. Seduction has been used in management theory to help distinguish between rational persuasion and a seemingly irrational succumbing to temptation. An influential paper (Deighton and Grayson, 1995), for example, shows how consumers are persuaded through seductive techniques that transform the consumer's initial resistance to a course of action into willing, even avid, compliance” (p. 666).

Consider how *The War for Talent* and related reports “work”. They use a rhetoric of warfare and vulnerability to evoke a desire for urgent action. If that rhetoric is transferred from the written page to MCs' sales techniques, then face-to-face with clients they will firstly evoke concern and secondly will persuasively argue the need to resolve the problematic issues – that is, a process akin to seduction. This requires a third step: satisfaction of that desire, what we may call a *coup de Casanova*. Satisfaction comes in the form of solutions to the (now urgent) problem. This is what we suggest, extrapolating from *The War for Talent*, went on behind closed doors in London, in meetings with government officials and senior civil servants.

That is, when marketing their services behind closed doors MCs position themselves within a dominant seductor position, placing officials and civil servants as seductees. This requires a complex and tricky manoeuvre. Calas and Smircich (1991, p. 568) write that leadership's power is predicated upon the seductive ability “to attract and stimulate, to overcome”. It concerns domination and servitude and, most importantly, its power is hidden beneath the surface. MCs must recognise that power and appeal to it, they must at the same time dismantle seductees' identities as successful leaders if they are to seduce them. This requires a complex positioning of clients as weak and powerful, vulnerable but capable, if they are to be seduced by techniques, deducible in *The War for Talent*, to dominate potential clients without their clients being aware of that domination. They must arouse the libidinal energy of senior leaders' image of themselves as leaders (see Authors, 2017). This image, as Ford (2019) has argued, is paradoxical because leadership not only confers power and an important identity upon “the leader”, it also *creates* insecurity, anxiety and ambiguity in leaders. That is, leadership identity is constituted within desires for both domination and subordination, of seduction and being seduced. The rhetoric of *The War for Talent* connects with those desires.

Thus, behind those closed doors where MCs meet with their very senior clients, we imagine a seductive dance in which MCs disarm potential clients through tapping into (conscious and unconscious) feelings of vulnerability and power. In this dance, MCs both invoke the narcissistic wounds of leadership and salve them with the balm of their own services.

The next stage in implementation involves not seduction but power. Regional and local level CEOs and senior managers were ordered to implement a talent management strategy. They did not need to be seduced because of their lower position in the organisational hierarchy – they had to obey. The use of the term “talent management”, even if it held little appeal to regional and district CEOs, would, through the power of the performative, actively constitute it as “reality,” and MC prognostications then become organisational realities.

This is why we suggest MCs influence public sector leadership through seductive performativity: seduction occurs behind closed doors at the most senior levels, and the orders that follow from those most senior of leaders introduce the concepts at other levels, thus turning abstract, immaterial MC products into concrete, material everyday actions.

Concluding thoughts

Management consultancy is a vast business whose influence reaches deeply into public and private sector organisations around the world. Understanding of the variegated policies and practices that constitute contemporary modes of governance therefore requires comprehension of management consultants' role within those policies and practices. This paper argued that management consultants influence public sector leadership through insertion of their products into definitions of, and performative constitution of, local level leadership.

These influential reports by the management consultancy firm, McKinsey & Company, constituted an urgent need for the newly identified concept of talent management and the secrecy surrounding its reception. It is this mystery surrounding the decisions about a talent management strategy in the NHS and the concealment of decisions behind closed doors, which leads us to offer a theory of management consultants' influence on leaders as one of performative seduction.

Whilst talent management and its adoption by senior leaders in the NHS is the focus of this paper, it is worth reflecting on the extent to which the seductive processes outlined here are witnessed more widely when management consultants engage with clients. There is clearly an emerging research agenda that considers further the ways through which the seduction process is institutionalised, with such processes being used not only by McKinsey & Company but also more widely within the management consultancy community. Given the secrecy that we encountered, together with the increasing reliance of organisations on management consultancy advice and their lack of accountability – especially when they are being used so extensively by governments and the public sector – this all suggests an urgent case of more in-depth exploration of management consultants in all organisations across public and private sectors.

Notes

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/sep/29/a-56m-bill-and-rising-the-cost-of-covid-consultancy-contracts>
2. <https://twitter.com/stimmopaul1/status/1314222318433042432?s = 27>
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