



Management knowledge in the mirror: Scholarship, fashion and Simmel

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abstract

This paper explores the use of the concept of fashion in arguments about management knowledge, using the popularity of that literature during the 2000s as a case study. In order to do this, it will move through a series of linked arguments. First, that research on ‘management fashions’ has become fashionable, and that this has provided a topic for academics to write about. Second, that research on ‘management fashions’ appears to only ceremonially cite earlier work on fashion from outside the management disciplines, such as that by Simmel. Third, that this means that much research on management fashions appears to adopt an attitude which insulates its own judgements about what is mere fashion and what is well grounded science from a wider understanding of the role of fashion in social affairs more generally. We conclude by suggesting that once questions of fashionability are admitted into management epistemology, all practices and distinctions become necessarily understood in terms of imitation, including the ones in this article.

Introduction

...fashion lives only in a perpetual round of giddy imitation and restless vanity. To be old fashioned is the greatest crime a coat or hat can be guilty of. To look like nobody else is a sufficiently mortifying reflection; to be in danger of being mistaken for one of the rabble is worse. Fashion constantly begins and ends in the two things it abhors most, singularity and vulgarity. (Hazlitt 1991: 148)

Consider this scene, from the 2006 film *The Devil Wears Prada*¹. It is an exchange between a dowdy new employee, Andy Sachs - a wannabe journalist who believes herself to be unaffected by the unimportant fripperies of high fashion - and Miranda Priestly - *Runway* magazine's editor. They are in the middle of a discussion about a possible feature on 'The New Skirt' with a group of fashionistas at the time that the exchange takes place. Miranda and some assistants are deciding between two similar belts for an outfit. Andy sniggers because she thinks they look exactly the same.

Miranda Priestly: Something funny?

Andy Sachs: No. No, no. Nothing's... You know, it's just that both those belts look exactly the same to me. You know, I'm still learning about all this stuff and, uh...

Miranda Priestly: 'This... stuff? Oh. Okay. I see. You think this has nothing to do with you. You go to your closet and you select... I don't know... that lumpy blue sweater, for instance because you're trying to tell the world that you take yourself too seriously to care about what you put on your back. But what you don't know is that that sweater is not just blue, it's not turquoise. It's not lapis. It's actually cerulean. And you're also blithely unaware of the fact that in 2002, Oscar de la Renta did a collection of cerulean gowns. And then I think it was Yves Saint Laurent... wasn't it who showed cerulean military jackets? I think we need a jacket here. And then cerulean quickly showed up in the collections of eight different designers. And then it, uh, filtered down through the department stores and then trickled on down into some tragic Casual Corner where you, no doubt, fished it out of some clearance bin. However, that blue represents millions of dollars and countless jobs and it's sort of comical how you think that you've made a choice that exempts you from the fashion industry when, in fact, you're wearing the sweater that was selected for you by the people in this room from a pile of stuff. 2

The etymology of the word 'fashion' comes from the latin *facere*, to make or do. It is in this sense that we want to ask how one part of management knowledge has been made. That is to say, how has the domain of 'management fashion' been established, and what are its assumptions and limits? It is clear that in recent years there has been a growing interest in the notion that management ideas and techniques are subject to swings in fashion in a similar manner to clothing styles and music tastes. Timothy Clark has suggested that there have been a number of issues raised by the importance of management fashion as an area of research, and we cite two of them below.

Second, some commentators have highlighted the need to explain and understand a puzzling paradox. Managers' enthusiasm for unproven conjecture continues unabated despite critical exposés in the popular press and academic research

1 Thanks to the editor and referees for their comments on earlier versions of this paper.

2 <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0458352/quotes>, consulted 24th February 2011.

indicating that management ideas and techniques proclaimed as ‘new’ and ‘revolutionary’ do not deliver what they promise and indeed can do more harm than good (e.g. Carson et al., 2000; Clark and Salaman, 1998).

Third, management fashion is seen as a potential threat to the role of academics in that ‘scholars might lose ground and their traditional authoritative role over management knowledge might further diminish’ (Abrahamson and Eisenman, 2001: 68). (2001: 1650-1)

This paper will explore the use of the concept of fashion in arguments about management knowledge, using the expansion of this literature during the 2000s as a kind of ‘case study’. We are particularly interested in Clark’s third conjecture, and the problems it suggests for academics in addressing his second one. It is clear enough that fashion has provided an useful subject matter for academics to write about but, oddly, the research on ‘management fashions’ appears to only ceremonially cite earlier work on fashion from outside the management disciplines, such as that by Simmel, as well as Veblen and Bell (or, for that matter, Tarde, Barthes, Benjamin, Bourdieu, Rancière and so on). We will suggest that this implies that much research on management fashions appears to insulate its own judgements about what is mere fashion and what is well-grounded science from a wider understanding of the role of fashion in social affairs more generally. In other words, there is a clear tension between Clark’s second and third points because if we look at contemporary writings on management fashion through the work of Simmel, it becomes clear that there is no safe place to stand in order to condemn the tastes of others whilst also simultaneously claiming that your preferences are based on impartial judgements. And that, as we will show later, includes this paper too, with its implicit claim that we are better scholars than others, because we have read Simmel and are not merely citing ‘ceremonially’. As Miranda Priestly understands, once questions of fashionability are admitted into questions of judgement, all our practices become embedded in circuits of imitation and distinction.

A fashion for fashion

First, we need to briefly understand something about the nature of the academic debates about management fashion. In an important contribution, Clark clears ground in the following terms:

...research on management fashions centres on attempts to explain managers’ enthusiasm for ideas whose truth claims are characterized as fundamentally flawed. ... This paper is not concerned with a critical examination of such claims about the nature of fashionable knowledge... Rather, its focus is on identifying a number of shortcomings with respect to empirical analyses of fashion cycles and

the general focus of the extant management fashion literature. Three issues are discussed: (1) the (over)use of citation analysis; (2) the focus on the dissemination/broadcasting phase of the fashion cycle; and (3) the incorporation of ideas into different domains within the management fashion-setting community. (2004: 298)

The problems with the fashion literature suggested by Clark are indeed worthy of addressing, but as Swan carefully shows in her response to his paper, there is a contradiction in Clark's argument here. He indicts research on management fashion for its fashionableness by utilising precisely the same sort of 'linear view of the production of management knowledge' (Swan, 2004: 310) that he sees as problematic in the objects of his critique. For example, he claims that the 'growing level of activity in this area is evidenced by the proliferation of conference papers, published articles, books and the publication of Special Issues on Management Fashion in the *Journal of Management History* (1999) and *Organization* (2001)' (Clark, 2004: 298). Yet on the next page he claims that the 'tendency in the literature to assume that there is a symbiotic relationship between the pattern in the volume of discourse and the trends in the adoption and rejection of ideas by organizations... is rather like conducting an analysis of the clothing featured in advertisements in fashion magazines, such as *Vogue* or *Harper's & Queen*, in order to determine what the average person is wearing'. He supports his point with a footnote to Kroeber's study of 'illustrations of dresses in a number of leading fashion magazines between 1844 and 1914', noting Kroeber's admission 'that "a knowledge of the course followed by ideals of dress", while valuable in itself, did not reflect trends in "real dress" because "the actual wear of average men and women lags somewhat ineffectually behind the incisive styles of models or pictures' (1919: 238).

Kroeber and Clark are right, in the sense that we can't read off the everyday from the catwalk, but this does not mean that they are unrelated. Indeed, the very logic of fashion requires that there is some relation (Kawamura, 2004; Craciun, 2013; Corner, 2014). What Clark seems to be avoiding here is the idea that what management academics cite and what managers actually do might *both* have some relation to fashion. Just as Andy Sachs wishes to assert that her choices about belts are hers, so does Clark wish to suggest that the froth of citations should not be mistaken for actual decisions about what is to be done in actual organizations, or indeed the research agendas of proper academics who are capable of understanding that a particular fashion is 'fundamentally flawed'. He is certainly right in pointing to the difference between different forms of data, but it might be misleading to then go on to suggest that fashion is somehow less important in some domains, and of course that some choices about what to write about are not influenced by questions of fashion. The distinction between appearance and essence which Clark deploys here relies on a division which a

more generalized understanding of fashion necessarily erodes. Once fashion is admitted, we all need to look in the mirror more attentively.

Pseudoevents and synthetic products

In another example of this sort of logic, Clark and Greatbatch (2004) report an interesting study of the production process of 'best-selling management books' that entailed conducting repeated lengthy, semi-structured interviews with a number of the authors, book editors, editor/publishers and ghost-writers of six exemplars of the genre identified. The study was well conducted and such backstage accounts of the production process of managerial texts are undoubtedly rare. However, what really intrigues us about the piece is the section on 'Fashion as Image-Spectacle'. It follows a recapitulation of an account of research on fashionable management ideas and then moves on to a very promising line of argument concerning the deployment of the notion of fashion in such literature. They begin by noting that the management fashion literature tends to be uninformed by broader discussions about similar social phenomena or theories of aesthetics.

Management fashion is regarded as a special case requiring new theory and explanation. For example, in the most cited article on the topic, Abrahamson (1996 ... , p. 255) has argued that in contrast to the beauty of aesthetic fashion, management techniques must appear rational and progressive and are shaped by technical and economic forces in addition to sociopsychological forces. Consequently, theories of aesthetic fashions are deemed inappropriate. ... We wish to build on this latter point by arguing that management and aesthetic fashions both express and exemplify broader social trends to which they are inextricably linked. In this sense they are not different forms of fashion. (Clark and Greatbatch, 2004: 402-3, our emphasis)

However, instead of turning to a huge literature theorising fashion as a general social process (such as Tarde, 1890/1903; Veblen, 1899/1994, 1934; Simmel, 1904/1957; Bell, 1948 and so on) the paper turns instead to the work of Boorstin (1961/1992) and Debord (1967) on the 'Image' and 'Spectacle', respectively – primarily as interpreted by Best and Kellner (1997; 2000). This appears to reflect Clark and Greatbatch's tendency to situate contemporary fashion as distinctively modern, a reflection of 'broader social developments with respect to communication' and the 'pre-eminence of the image' (2004: 398). We think that this is misleading, in part because it allows the contemporary to be understood as constituted by fashion, whilst the past and certain academic practices can be putatively insulated from such developments. Bell (1948), for example, is at pains to trace aspects of his account of the development of human finery to at least the medieval period, Tarde (1890/1903) asserts the presence of fashion in antiquity,

and Simmel (1904) repeatedly evokes the ways in which the relatively timeless practices of certain 'primitive' (*sic*) societies can be grasped through the notion of fashion. Fashion, all these authors suggest, has always been with us.

The distinctiveness and the continuities of fashion are hence lost in Clark and Greatbatch's argument, but just as puzzling is their classification of knowledge. They suggest that modern circumstances are constituted by 'pseudoevents and synthetic products' which build upon one another 'so that we can no longer assume the image we consume bears a direct relationship to an original' (2004: 398). They then single out fashionable management texts as exemplary of these processes. However, despite asserting these general truths about the (post)modern world, they are then deployed as a contrast to other products and processes which (still) bear 'utility' (*ibid.*: 410) and authenticity (*ibid.*: 419). The problematic nature of this move is most clearly revealed in assertions such as 'some of the books upon which a number of recent management fashions are founded are pseudofoms in that they are manufactured coproductions' (*ibid.*: 419-20). Some processes and products are synthetic while others are authentic. Just how this distinction is made is considered in a footnote.

We recognize that this article also forms a coproduction in that prior to its publication we received and responded to the constructive feedback from three referees. These comments have affected the development of the article. However, where this process differs is that we were responsible for the subsequent amendments and overall authorship of the article. (*ibid.*: 421)

Clark and Greatbatch are interested in fashion, but worry that fashion is corrosive and fake. In order to construct a platform to say this, they used some references to postmodern ideas which were fashionable at the time that they were writing in order to diagnose the problems of the present age, but insist nonetheless that they can tell the difference between work which is merely fashionable, and that which is authentic. In an age when the author is often enough claimed to be dead, they claim authorship as a guarantee that their text is somehow different to others. This is a common enough move in the human sciences generally – the assertion of a generalization concerning the social or the human underwritten by the implicit guarantee that the author (and usually the implied reader) are somehow able to remain detached from these conditions of possibility. For the intellectual, this is a problem if they want to explain how a particular configuration is shaped by social forces, but rarely also attempt to simultaneously explain how it is that 'intellectuals' (or even academics) are somehow free from the determinations that press so heavily on others (Gouldner, 1970; Parker, 2002). It's a problem which this paper is not exempt from either, but more of this later.

In the next section, we will turn to some writing on fashion which writers on management fashion might have used, in order to begin reflecting on this puzzle.

History and fashion

Quentin Bell's well cited and multiply reprinted (1948) work on fashion, *On human finery*, wears its considerable erudition exceedingly lightly. It is also, in its engagement with and development of the work of Thorstein Veblen, insightful in its grasp of the mechanisms of fashion, but is very rarely cited in the management fashion literature. Bell asserts the omnipresence of fashion in at least the last 500 years of European history; the massive importance yet essential slipperiness of the demands of sartorial morality and hence reputability; the absolute necessity of social classes for its functioning; and the essential role of sumptuousness, itself tied to futility, at its core. Building upon Veblen's themes of conspicuous leisure and waste (1899), Bell provides an introduction to the history of fashion 'tied to that of the resurgent middle class and the emulative process to which that class gave birth' (*ibid.*: 101). The endlessness of the processes and their contrary demands of sameness and difference at their heart are perhaps most vividly captured by his quote from Hazlitt:

Fashion is an odd jumble of contradictions, of sympathies and antipathies. It exists only by its being participated among a number of persons, and its essence is destroyed by being communicated to a greater number. It is a continual struggle between 'the great vulgar and the small' to get the start of, or keep up with each other in the race of appearances, by an adoption on the part of the one of such external and fantastic symbols as strike the attention and excite the envy or admiration of the beholder, and which are no sooner made known and exposed to public view for this purpose, than they are successfully copied by the multitude, the slavish herd of imitators, who do not wish to be behindhand with their betters in outward show and pretensions, and then sink without any further notice into disrepute and contempt. (1991: 148)

Bell (1948: 126-7) notes that the 'goodness' of any garment is not reducible to its use value and that this goodness is of importance regardless of whether or not it belongs to or is worn by a particular person. That is to say, understanding fashion involves understanding our judgements of others. It is a mobile social relation, not an immanent property of goods, opinions or actions. Bell further contends that goodness in attire is in large part the product of sumptuousness, with that sumptuousness itself depending upon the capacity to demonstrate that expense was incurred in its production. This leads him to consider the ways in which sumptuousness is realised: via expense incurred in the acquiring of the object of display, via the ways in which it doesn't suit a productive existence, via its echoes of 'reputable' pursuits that are themselves of no direct utility, and via

its indifference to the morals and mores of the common social participant as expressed in their ‘vulgar prejudice’.

Bell consistently reminds us of the abiding importance of ‘class’ in all matters of fashion in order that we understand that sumptuousness in attire can only deliver ‘goodness’ if its mode of realisation is simultaneously recognised as signalling membership of ‘a reputable class’ via its ‘uniform’ nature. And it is this tying of fashion to class that gives the whole process its dynamism. As changes in methods of production and access to new materials enable variations in what can be produced, existing relative values of sumptuousness, and hence goodness, between different attires are agitated. This provides fresh fuel to fire changes in fashion as classes jockey for position whilst running the ceaseless race for appearances. For Bell, the changes wrought by the industrial revolution in the nature of the ruling class, as well its capacity to demonstrate its position via its consumption practices, are a key moment of acceleration in the race, but the process is one that precedes this moment.

Bell’s historical fleshing out of Veblen’s insights seems to us to be a pretty comprehensive and defensible set of ideas that one might apply to understanding shifting fashions in apparel. Moreover, and this is the key point here, it is a conceptual structure which clearly opens the possibility of a fuller understanding of how and why both the academy and practice of management are subject to ‘swings in fashion’ (Clark, 2004: 297). However, Veblen and Bell have been cited hardly at all by writers on management fashion, unlike Simmel, who has been cited a little, though often in some ways that suggest that his work hasn’t actually been read either. This is curious, but it suggested to us that it might be worth investigating whether citations might also be understood through the lens of fashion. That is to say, can we understand the production of work on management fashion as involving the same sort of oscillation between reputability and novelty which Veblen and Bell describe?

Prêt a Porter Simmel

As we will see in the next section, the writings of Georg Simmel are subtle and insightful, and he is often regarded as a social theorist on a par with Marx, Durkheim and Weber (Frisby, 2002; Schermer and Jary, 2013). Yet his work is not as well-known as these three, in part because he appears sometimes to be an eclectic essayist, but also because his writing is also rather inaccessible. His 1904 essay on fashion is typical in this respect, a piece which is dense and appears disconnected from the concerns of his other works. That being said, Simmel is not unknown to the management fashion academic, so let’s start there. We begin

with Abrahamson's very heavily cited paper (1996) in the *Academy of Management Review*. After first attributing to Sapir (1937) the insight that 'fashions gratify competing psychological drives for individuality and novelty, on the one hand, and conformity and traditionalism, on the other' (Abrahamson, 1996: 271), he moves on to Simmel's (1957) 'more *sociological* explanation', which he summarises as proposing that 'fashions serve not only to reveal who is in fashion, but also to distinguish high-status from low-status individuals' (Abrahamson, 1996: 272, italics in original). On the basis of this summary of Simmel, Abrahamson formulates the following proposition – '*New management fashions will tend to emerge when old management fashions have been adopted by lower reputation organizations*' (*op cit.*, italics in original).

This sort of understanding of fashion as a stratified field where innovation begins at the top is the commonest way that Simmel is mentioned in the literature on management fashion, when he is mentioned at all. If we look at work published in the 2000s combining 'management fashion' and 'Simmel' as search terms, then there are a few references, though only a fraction of the number that we find to, for example, the work of Abrahamson, or Clark and Greatbatch. Look in more detail, and you discover that the citations are largely decorative or ceremonial, with no substantial attempt to apply Simmel's ideas to the field of management fashion. For example, an article by Mamman (2002) contains no reference whatsoever to Simmel, despite the fashion essay appearing in the reference list. Kretschmer et al. (1999), includes only the following mention: a bracketed 'much can be learned from sociological literature on fashion; cf. Hirsch, 1972; Simmel, 1957' on page S63. Hamde's (2002) piece is exemplary in the ways in which Simmel is apprehended. He appears first, on page 393: 'Although there has been substantial work on fashions (Sellerberg, 1987; Simmel, 1957) it was Abrahamson (1996) who specifically applied the fashion perspective to organizations'. Later down the same page we find 'Three approaches to fashion have been identified: the trickle down-theory (Simmel, 1957), ... first used extensively in the clothes industry (Simmel, 1957; King, 1973), according to which lower classes copy the dressing styles of the upper classes'.

Most often, Simmel is invoked as an authority with weight, such as in Clark and Greatbatch's chapter in Kipping and Engwall (2002), which contains the phrase 'classic' theorists such as Durkheim, Marx, Simmel, and Weber...'. A piece by ten Bos and Heusinkveld (2007) mentions only Simmel's *Philosophy of money*, and then only as additional reading, whilst Guler et al. (2002) draws on the 1950 publication of the 1917 text, *The sociology of George Simmel*, with reference to a point about dyadic and triadic relations. Only a piece by Czarniawska and Panozzo (2008) represents anything approaching a serious engagement with Simmel's work, attributing (but problematising) a trickle-down notion to him,

but nevertheless also noting the similarity of the trickle down notion to Herbert Spencer's 1880 notion of 'reverential imitation'. It seems that, this last example notwithstanding, the use of Simmel in the management fashion literature is largely ceremonial, in the sense that his name is duly checked, but his ideas do not appear to have been read. The citing of Simmel clearly serves some sort of purpose, but it is not to explore in any detail what Simmel actually wrote. It seems to us that this is interesting, in the sense that it shows us an example of academic fashion at work, but it is also a shame, because we think that Simmel's writing helps us to answer the problems that Clark formulates as issues for the field in general.

Simmel on Fashion

Whilst Clark and Greatbatch (2004) problematize the bases of all distinctions in a 'postmodern' world, before subsequently seeking to draw on distinctions that they find of merit, Simmel shows the ways in which difference and similarity are always co-implicated. He situates fashion in the broadest possible terms, beginning, as in much of his work, with an articulation of an unceasing, de-centred, dialectic to apprehend our (social) world of 'two antagonistic forces, tendencies, or characteristics' (1904: 130)³.

The whole history of society is reflected in the striking conflicts, the compromises, slowly won and quickly lost, between socialistic adaptation to society and individual departure from its demands ... Each in its sphere attempts to combine the interest in duration, unity and similarity with that in change, specialization, and peculiarity. It becomes self-evident that there is no institution, no law, no estate of life, which can uniformly satisfy the full demands of the two opposing principles. (ibid.: 131)

The ceaseless movement of fashion thus appears as an exemplary case of the deferral and extension of the tensions manifest in human life – 'the continuous movement that characterizes all aspects of human existence' (Cooper, 2010: 69). This is the ability to affect and be affected as an inherently social being whose identity is always only grasped as it oscillates between similarity and difference in a shifting context within which it is forever pulled. Cooper (2010: 69) suggests a poststructural and processual reading of Simmel in which the human agent is always one element in a wider whole. Simmel, like Cooper, understands human beings as restlessly moving between others, an infinite movement of parts forever trying to complete themselves in the pursuit of a wider whole that always recedes when approached.

3 A conception of the social that he may well have developed through his readings of Gabriel Tarde, particularly his 1890 *The laws of imitation*.

Simmel's argument in his fashion essay suggests that not only are the twin tendencies toward imitation and differentiation 'irreconcilably opposed' but that this opposition means that 'social life represents a battle-ground, of which every inch is stubbornly contested, and social institutions may be looked upon as the peace-treaties, in which the constant antagonism of both principles has been reduced externally to a form of cooperation.' Moreover, it is this understanding of human beings that suggests his understanding of fashion as an 'universal phenomenon in the history of our race... one of the many forms of life by the aid of which we seek to combine in uniform spheres of activity the tendency towards social equalization with the desire for individual differentiation and change' (Simmel, 1904: 132-3). This takes his analysis much further than Veblen or Bell's historical sociology, embedding an understanding of fashion in a philosophical argument about what it means to be a social being at all.

It is within such an understanding that fashion's function in class distinction (of which it is seen by Simmel to be 'a product') is made clear, with its 'double' role consisting in demonstrating collectivity and distinction at one and the same time. This means that the logic that applies to fashion is not concerned with practicality, but with the display of difference and similarity. 'The absolute indifference of fashion to the material standards of life is well illustrated by the way in which it recommends something appropriate in one instance, something abstruse in another, and something materially and aesthetically quite different in a third' (*ibid.*: 134). Fashion is useful, but the utility to be considered here operates within the domain of the social, not that of the practical, of the utilitarian.

If we agree with Simmel that this is the case, then fashion can operate within any social context – including those which parade greater objectivity in the delineation of their concerns, such as science, medicine or academic life. However, Simmel suggests, such sources can only become resources for fashion if and when their relations to their origins become distanced:

Fashion occasionally will accept objectively determined subjects such as religious faith, scientific interests, even socialism and individualism; but it does not become operative as fashion until these subjects can be considered independent of the deeper human motives from which they have risen. (*ibid.*: 135)

In other words, any symbol can enter the fashion system once it becomes detached from the dense social relations that produced it – whether a particular belt or a citation to a certain social theorist. When the linkage to origins remains, when our concerns are seen to derive from timeless considerations of the ethical, the true, the just and so on then Simmel suggests that the rule of fashion can become 'unendurable'. The ephemerality and fickleness of fashion seems to

trivialise those matters which are generally considered to be beyond its grasp. It is perhaps a mild version of this discomfort that motivates many management writers to seek to isolate as the product of fashion ideas about effective managerial techniques and practices whose 'truth claims are characterized as fundamentally flawed' (Clark, 2004: 298) and whose popularity results from their progressive garb and their perceived novelty. This means that they can then be separated from other ideas – presumably the production of 'scientific interests' and the like – which ostensibly deliver what they promise.

The desire of writers on management fashion to make these sort of distinctions finds some support in Simmel:

[T]here is good reason why externals – clothing, social conduct, amusements – constitute the specific field of fashion, for here no dependence is placed on really vital motives of human action. It is the field which we can most easily relinquish to the bent towards imitation, which it would be a sin to follow in important questions. (1904: 135)

Yet the designation of a phenomenon or approach as sinful does not make the sin impossible or even unlikely. Simmel understands that social relations are constantly transformed by fashion, and he does not appear to believe that there are any areas which are somehow immune from it. That suggests that ideas about appropriate and effective management techniques and practices must also be put forward by people who are also shaped by fashion themselves. But this is not a condemnation. Simmel is clear that fashionableness in itself provides no direct indictment of an object, practice or process (*ibid.*: 139). Rather the notion of fashion must be transformed from a general to a bounded process if it is to function effectively as a term of opprobrium.

Despite the frequent use of 'fashion' as a negative dismissal, as it is in the hands of many of the management writers we have been considering, Simmel suggests that people are most likely to be drawn to its virtues and seek its display when their (privileged) current status is at risk. 'Segregation by means of differences ... is expedient only where the danger of absorption and obliteration exists' (Simmel, 1904: 137). And for middle and senior managers, whose entitlement to the privileges of their positions depends upon their ability to perform a role which often has responsibility and status but little power, anxieties continually exist (Knights and Willmott, 1999; Lilley, 2001; Armstrong, 2002). Managers are more and more short-lived in their role inhabitation and more and more driven to be seen to be making an immediate impact through change initiatives of all sorts, justified on the basis of a world in which change is supposed to be the only constant (Grey, 2003; Kavanagh et al., 2007). Simmel suggests that the 'more nervous the age, the more rapidly its fashions change', and that this is

exacerbated by the desire for differentiation which continually demands symbols of exclusivity which are supposedly associated with the upper classes. It is this idealised image of the upper classes – whose operation in our managerial world is most clearly signalled by aspirational products such as the ‘Executive Lounge’ and the ‘Executive MBA’ – that might be the key to understanding the motivations of many middle managers whose participation in this ideal is continually deferred. The adverts in business magazines incite desire for certain airlines, hotel chains, watches, cars, holiday destinations – all sold on the basis of their exclusivity. But such marketing ensures that exclusivity never lasts, and the best kept secrets always leak.

What is at stake in fashion is the perpetuation of distinction and its attendant privileges in the face of the perpetual degeneration of the grounds on which they depend and their re-establishment through a ceaseless procession of the new (and, by implication, better). It is this that makes fashion so pronounced a part of modernity. It is not unique to the modern period, being found in all societies, but Simmel certainly suggests that its reach is extended in societies which accentuate the present. This means that ‘it has overstepped the bounds of its original domain, which comprised only personal externals, and has acquired an increasing influence over taste, over theoretical convictions, and even over the moral foundations of life’ (1904: 140). It seems that fashion has become imperial in its reach, being an obligatory passage point that must be traversed by all, *regardless of whether they seek to stand with fashion or against it*. For as Simmel notes

[T]he same combination which extreme obedience to fashion acquires can be won also by opposition to it. Whoever consciously avoids following the fashion, does not attain the consequent sensation of individualization through any real individual qualification, but rather through mere negation of the social example. If obedience to fashion consists in imitation of such an example, conscious neglect of fashion represents similar imitation, but under an inverse sign. (ibid.: 142)

This, it seems to us, is a very useful way of thinking about the claimed virtues of the management academic, apparently freed from the fripperies of appearance and display. Simmel helps us to understand the desire of some management scholars to claim to be able to trade reliable distinctions in the market for managerial knowledge; the discrimination of that which works from that which does not, of relevance and impact from mere fluff. But whether fashion avoidance is a reliable sign of ‘scientific neutrality’ is far more moot a point because there is very little evidence which would allow anyone to make a claim about effectiveness that did not involve social evaluations, always embedded in particular times and places. At best such a claim about ‘unfashionability’ likely represents assertion of one’s location within a particular class of people; at worst

an admission of the fear of being washed away by the tides of fashion, as Clark noted in his third conjecture.

So we might understand why management academics are so resistant to being branded as creatures of fashion, but why do managers adopt fashions when their image as utilitarians seems so distant from this dizzy world? We suggest, again following Simmel, that management fashion enables managers to function as managers whilst believing that they are setting some part of themselves apart. That is to say, if we add a little Marx to the Simmel, it allows them to feel it legitimate to expropriate the labour of others for themselves and the capital that they in part represent, since they exist in a group or class that does the same and demonstrates its rectitude to itself in the shifting forms it adopts and circulates as signs of its progressiveness.

Fashion... is... one of the forms by the aid of which men seek to save their inner freedom all the more completely by sacrificing externals to the enslavement by the general public... [F]ashion is... a social form of marvellous expediency, because... it affects only the externals of life, only those sides of life which are turned to society. It provides us with a formula by means of which we can unequivocally attest our dependence on what is generally adopted, our obedience to the standards established by our time, our class, and our narrower circle, and enable us to withdraw the freedom given us in life from externals and concentrate it more and more in our innermost natures. (Simmel, 1904: 147-8)

There is a symmetry here, in our Simmelian analysis of management fashion academics and fashionable managers. The former claim not to be fashionable in order to ensure that their knowledge claims can be claimed to be demonstrations of timeless values. The latter embrace fashionable ideas because they are a signal of relevance in a turbulent world, but also because it is then easier to construct the idea of an authentic inner life which is untouched by such trivia. Fashion, once admitted as an explanation of human conduct, will not be expelled easily. And it is to this that we now turn in our conclusion.

Conclusion

What is society? I have answered: Society is imitation. (Tarde, 1903: 74)

Following Simmel, who himself follows Tarde, we have argued that fashion is found almost everywhere. Despite the fact that its application to important matters often produces policing calls for its administration and ideally its exclusion, histories of science continually show us that ‘thought collectives’ and ‘paradigms’ shape thinking which is ostensibly established by reason and experiment (Fleck, 1935/1979; Kuhn, 1962). We have also seen that despite its ‘real seat’ being in the upper classes, that its sway is powerful in the middle

layers of stratified societies. Furthermore, claiming that you are unconcerned with fashion is itself a stance which is socially structured by the shifting meanings of the fashionable. As Bourdieu (1984) suggested, 'taste' is not simply a set of personal choices, but a structured hegemony of distinctions which are already provided in a social field. And there is no escaping that field, no way of being positioned outside it.

The rise of ideas about management fashion during the 2000s is merely a case here, but it is an interesting one because of the way in which it demonstrates some of the dynamics at work in claiming difference and similarity, both for managers and management academics. For the latter, the dangers are greater, because admitting fashion into such discussions necessarily presages a time in which research on management fashion might itself become old-fashioned. Now, a decade or so after these papers were published, we can probably say that is just what has happened, and this paper is perhaps best understood as a late footnote to those discussions. However, we do think that it throws light on some general processes. As Veblen suggested, the more esoteric the knowledge (in his day, Latin and Greek) the better suited it is to being useful within the conspicuous world of 'higher learning' (1918). Writing about management fashion has clearly been a useful way for academics to both display their fashionability and simultaneously to deny it, precisely the social processes which Simmel suggested were central to human sociality. Further, the construction of this area, like others (Parker, 2000), has involved a certain amnesia about writings which predated it – such as Bell and Veblen – and also a very selective appropriation of one writer who is sometimes cited as a classic but whose ideas have been largely ignored – Georg Simmel.

So what are we to do with the concept of 'fashion'? Rene ten Bos has an interesting take on this. In *Fashion and utopia in management thinking* (2000) ten Bos contrasts utopian rationalism with fashion, but it is the former which is denigrated and the latter celebrated. This is substantially different from the majority of other work on fashion conducted by management scholars, and it leads ten Bos to ask whether the discipline of management needs to become more, not less, fashionable. He suggests that the heart of the difficulty inherent in management scholars' critique of fashion, and particularly its implicit dismissal when compared to the elevation of utility and authenticity, lies in their disregard of the specificities of its deployment. The meanings of notions such as utility and authenticity are situated and shifting, and this is exactly what we would expect in a context in which the worth of ideas and people always depends

in part on fashion. The following is more than capable of demonstrating the point⁴ –

Dear Annie

Could my tatty old jeans pass for designer ones?

I have been perplexed recently by the trend for tatty old jeans. They're in every magazine, frayed and grotty, but with huge price tags. I have a number of pairs I keep for wearing around the house and garden, and wonder if my comfy old Levi's are OK for a (fairly relaxed) meeting I have to go to soon in London. Or will everyone know they aren't designer scruffy, just scruffy?

Sarah, Edington, Wiltshire

That depends very much on the meeting, but either way you're out of luck. If the meeting is with 'meedja' types, they'll probably see jeans as acceptable 'business' wear but will spot a mile off that they're the wrong make. See, the jeans you've seen in magazines may look grotty, but it took at least one designer, a stylist, art director, fashion-college intern and small pug-like dog to create them. The frays will be of just the right length, the colour just this side of French Riviera sun-bleached, the waistband allowing the pudenda just two inches of modesty. If, on the other hand, the meeting is with normal folk then they will just think you are scruffy. My advice is to leave the jeans at home and when you're in London, go to Harvey Nichols (020 7235 5000) or Liberty (020 7734 1234) and have a look at Juicy jeans, though they cost from £100 up. (The Observer Review, September 16, 2001)⁵

Like many a management and organisational theorist, perhaps most particularly those who claim to plough a culturally informed approach to their subjects and objects of interest, there is often an abiding unwillingness to take *seriously* that which is entailed by a cultural turn. As Simmel, ten Bos and Miranda Priestly suggest, fashion matters, and it should be scrutinised carefully, not used as a negative category which makes some other practice appear immune to it. Once you let culture into the explanation, you have to recognise that it is there all the way down. It cannot, with any consistency or coherence simply be used as a differentiator to claim that one phenomenon is *just* cultural whilst another is useful and authentic.

In the social sciences, the practices of academics are always implicated in the construction of their objects of interest, and this is as true of our rhetoric and citations as it is of anyone else's. In focussing on Simmel, a 'classic' author who we have suggested has been neglected, we are situating ourselves within a certain sort of unfashionability which is itself, of course, a claim which allows us to present ourselves as real scholars and others as fakes. We could have deployed

4 Thanks to Peter Armstrong for this example.

5 Note that, in using this as an illustration, rather than some example from management, we are simultaneously making a cultural claim about our slightly daring fashionability.

other citations as well or instead - Tarde, Barthes, Benjamin, Bourdieu or Rancière (or Deleuze, Žižek, Badiou, Serres and so on) – each capable (for the right kind of reader) of signalling different sorts of claims to sameness and difference. In that sense, all citations are ‘ceremonial’ in that they do their work as signifiers regardless of whether what they signify has actually been read, or is used in an argument. We think Simmel does the work we wanted to do in this paper, but are very conscious that we are creatures of fashion too. Our use of Simmel, like the decision to wear jeans which have been artfully ripped, itself says something about our attitude to fashion. Ultimately, we are no different to those we have criticised, and cannot escape this self-contradiction.

That being said, we think that the problem with many management writers’ mobilisation of the notion of fashion is that at times their grasp of the phenomena that is the object of their interest seems limited to the practices of *others*. Their gurus are mere fashion baubles, whilst our authorities are serious theorists (Lilley, 1997). What most concerns us, and motivated the writing of this paper, is the distinction that most writers on management fashion have made between a virtuous authenticity and consistency and the vices of a lack of it. The irony is that this is exactly what fashion achieves, in its ‘what’s in and what’s out’, its play of fake and authenticity (Craciun, 2013), and which applies just as much to topics and citations as it does to belts and distressed denim. That understanding these processes seems beyond the purview of much of the ‘management fashion’ literature remains its ‘central irony’ (Clark, 2004: 299).

More generally, we might say that management is subject to fashion not because it is the realm of the utilitarian, but rather because it is futile. If it was a practice which was merely the technocratic co-ordination of organization, ten Bos’s ‘utopian rationalism’, we might imagine that it could be more or less immune from fashion. But management clearly isn’t some sort of scientific engineering of the social, involving as it does the endless deployment of all sorts of hesitant and shifting attempts to legitimise means and ends, as well as to appropriate the value produced by the labour of others and then claim a value in that. And as academicians of management, we should always be careful not to sit too smugly as we observe and comment, because the displays of our catwalks, commentaries and, indeed, of our own good selves in the mirror, are fashioned all the way down. There is no escape from this conclusion, particularly in writings about management and fashion. Including this one, citations to Simmel and all.

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