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*The Accountability and Legitimacy of Knowledge Expert in Policy Making*

**Title of the paper**

*We're all managers now: Ideas, expertise, and management consultants*

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## **ABSTRACT**

The literature on the role of the expert in policy processes often acknowledges that expertise has a legitimating function. That is, the knowledge furnished by experts provides policymakers with the legitimacy to support their policy preferences. While this is important to acknowledge, what is less clear is the basis for that legitimacy. To unpack this ‘black box’, this paper looks at the mechanisms of legitimacy – what are the different forms that legitimacy can take? And why is it that certain kinds of expert are part of the government machinery, while others are not? To support these claims, I explore the role of the management consultant in policy processes. Management consultants are particularly useful to explore in understanding these questions. While the expertise that they provide is often treated with suspicion, policymakers still turn to consultants regularly for advice. I argue that this is because they have established themselves as legitimate experts through four mechanisms discursively. Drawing on the work of van Leeuwen (2007), I also identify how consultants have used four mechanisms of discursive legitimation – rationalization, authorization, moral evaluation, and mythopoesis – to do this.

Keywords: expertise; public policy; legitimation; management consultants

## INTRODUCTION

Since the time of Plato, the ‘expert’ has been a focus in studies of politics. In *The Republic*, Plato argues that those who govern best are the ‘philosopher kings’ – those who are intimately acquainted with the nature of knowledge. These ‘philosopher kings’ are the only actors able to use their knowledge to generate ideas regarding how to rule (Nawtony, 2003). Similarly, in *The New Atlantis*, Francis Bacon portrays a civilisation that is ruled by an elite of scientists, driven by evidence, and able to explain the causative relations between different social phenomena (Yep & Ngok, 2006). Bacon’s essay *On Counsel* explores similar themes (McKenna, 2006). Finally, Macchiavelli’s *Discourses* includes an entire chapter exploring the difficulties inherent in relying on expert advice for political decisions (1940 [1531]).

Policy scholarship has continued this trend. Indeed, it is widely recognised across the public policy literature that experts play a fundamental role within modern systems of policy. As Radaelli (1998, p. 2) points out, there is a ‘plethora’ of studies that focus on actors that translate knowledge into the policy domain. This work has focused on, for instance, the role of think tanks (Stone, 1996), as well as how policy-makers use knowledge (what is referred to as the ‘knowledge utilization’ literature – see, for instance, Weiss, 1979; Caplan, 1979). This work dates back to at least 1945, when Merton (1945) noted the distinct lack of empirical data of how experts shape the political process.

Since those early days, policy scholarship has made a number of empirical observations about how knowledge is used in policy processes, and, by extension, the ways in which experts furnish that knowledge (Spruijt et al., 2014). One key theme that runs through this literature is the ways in which knowledge has a legitimating function (Boswell, 2009). For instance, Spruijt et al. (2014), after surveying the literature on experts in policy, argue that, a theme in this work, is a question of what constitutes the legitimacy of expertise.

Likewise, Scholten (2011, p. 88) argues that, rather than ‘speaking truth to power’, expertise has a legitimating function, insofar as policymakers use scientific evidence as a way to attribute authority and legitimacy to their own policy agenda. Similar arguments are made by Boswell (2008), Nowotny (2003), and Conti (2010).

The legitimating function of expert knowledge is important to recognise. At the same time, there is a question regarding how this knowledge itself acquires legitimacy.

Policymakers and politicians make arguments and those arguments are legitimised by the knowledge provided by experts. But what makes the knowledge itself legitimate? How do policymakers decide upon which forms of knowledge (and thus which experts) they will rely? And what are the explanations we can offer that can account for the kinds of knowledge that are ultimately accepted by policymakers and their stakeholders? This paper seeks to answer these questions. To do this, it makes visible the social processes that underscore the legitimization of expert knowledge. It argues that the process of legitimization is fundamentally discursive – that it occurs through words and language.

To make these claims, the paper proceeds as follows: the next section provides an overview of the role of discourse in policy. It notes that discourses are central to the political realm, and outlines how the paper is conceptualising the term. It distinguishes between discourses, and storylines, and explains how storylines may eventually become a compelling narrative. Drawing on the work of Van Leeuwen, the section then describes the mechanisms that underscore the legitimating function of discourse. The second section traces the history of management consulting, providing the empirical basis for the analytic and theoretical claims made in the third section. It shows how consultants have become crucial experts in modern system of public policy, and provides numerous examples of this phenomenon. The third section links the second and third sections to

argue that consultants have been legitimised as experts through four main mechanisms: rationalization, authorization, moral evaluation, and mythopoesis.

## **DISCOURSE AND THE MECHANISMS OF LEGITIMATION**

### *Discourse*

It is almost cliché to observe that language has a powerful role to play in political life. Indeed, words are involved at every step of the policy process. They are used to define the problem; determine the suitable solutions; communicate with stakeholders; and provide advice to decision-makers. Words are the substance of policy documents, laws, and political arguments. In recognition of this fact, policy scholarship has, over the last 20 years or so, recognised the importance of language to policy analysis (Fischer & Forester, 1993). Part of the broader ‘linguistic turn’ in the social sciences, policy scholarship has introduced concepts like discourse, narratives, and storylines to account for the ways in which public policy is able to shape the social and political world.

Within this linguistic approach to policy analysis, a crucial concept is that of discourse. The term is somewhat controversial, and has different conceptualisations in different fields (see, for instance, Foucault, 1979; Fairclough, 1993). Following Hajer (1993, p. 45), this paper considers discourse to be an “ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categories through which meaning is given to phenomena”. In line with this definition, the term recognises that there are multiple ways of constructing reality. Truth is not something ‘out there’ to be discovered; rather it is the result of multiple or shared approaches to meaning. Discourses therefore are ways in which political actors make sense of otherwise neutral phenomena. For instance, a seismologist may see an earthquake as resulting from the separation of rocks underneath the earth’s surface. However, a religious fundamentalist may see it is a purposeful event designed to punish the sins of individuals living in the immediate area of the earthquake. In this way, a discourse about earthquakes

emerges as these two actors communicate their different versions of an empirical phenomenon. The earthquake definitely happened – what matters for the analyst is the meaning that is made from that earthquake.

The previous example demonstrates that discourses can be subject to internal contradictions and inconsistencies. Different actors will propagate different versions of events, relative to their own cognitive frames, their own interpretations of the world.

This means that discourses themselves are reducible – there are extra-discursive elements that can be exposed. These elements are referred to as ‘storylines’ (Hajer, 2006). A storyline is a “condensed statement summarising complex narratives, used by people as ‘short hand’ in discussions” (Hajer, 2006, p. 69). Storylines relate different social phenomena to each other in a relatively predictable structure. The structure has a beginning, middle, and end. Storylines also relate causes to effects. That is, they describe change over time, whether past or future (Boswell, Geddes & Scholten, 2011). It is through storylines that meaning is made over the relationship between particular social phenomena (Feldman et al., 2004).

To illustrate, in the aforementioned example of the earthquake, the seismologist and the religious fundamentalist have two very separate storylines. For the seismologist, the storyline is that tectonic plates rub up against each other, causing the earth to move. For the religious fundamentalist, the storyline may be that God saw the sins of the people living in the area and brought the earthquake into existence. Both of these storylines describe cause-and-effect relationships. They also have a beginning, middle, and end.

Not all storylines, however, are equal. That is, some stories are more likely to be accepted than others. When this occurs, we are able to identify a compelling narrative (Boswell, Geddes & Scholten, 2011). A compelling narrative is one that enjoys broad acceptance by people in positions of power (i.e. government decision-makers). In addition to setting

out causal relationships between phenomena, a compelling narrative must fulfil a number of other criteria. First, it must align with pre-determined interests. Where a narrative allows an actor to promote their pre-determined agenda, or advance that actor's interests, the narrative is more likely to be compelling. It must also be internally consistent – that is, a listener must, at the very least, intuitively accept how the various elements of the narrative relate to each other. The narrative must also be plausible, insofar as it must align with how the listener understands the world (Boswell, Geddes & Scholten, 2011). Where these criteria are met, a narrative is more likely to be accepted, or to 'sound right' (Hajer, 2006).

When a narrative becomes sufficiently compelling, and enjoys widespread acceptance, it becomes institutionalised. Discourse institutionalisation refers to the phenomenon of a discourse being translated into institutional arrangements. The new public management (NPM) reforms of the 1990s can be seen as an example of discourse institutionalisation. As part of the NPM (and as will be discussed in more detail below), private sector management philosophies and approaches were instituted in the public sector on the basis of a discourse relating to the superiority of business management practices over those of government. Likewise, when actors are only seen as credible when they draw on that specific narrative, the discourse becomes structured (Hajer, 1995). 'Discourse structuration' refers to actors only being seen as credible if they draw on the ideas, concepts and categories of a given discourse. For instance, a consultant may only be seen as credible if he or she uses terms like 'outputs', 'outcomes', 'performance measures' or 'performance indicators'. When a discourse achieves both structuration and institutionalisation, it can be described as being influential within a particular policy area (Hajer, 1995).

Of particular importance to this discussion, discourses also have a legitimating effect (Hanberger, 2003; Galvan & Beltran, 2016; Van Leeuwen, 2007). For instance, Galvan & Beltran (2016) explore the discourses used by children whose emigrant parents have left them behind in their home country. The authors find that the children reproduce and rationalize discourses of sacrifice and wellbeing to legitimise their parents' actions. This discursive character of the process of legitimation has largely been ignored by the public policy literature. It is therefore helpful to look elsewhere to understand conceptually how this might occur. To support some of the claims made in this paper, I have therefore looked to critical discourse analysis, particularly the work of Van Leeuwen (2007).

#### *Legitimation and critical discourse analysis*

Arguments for the legitimating effects of discourse have been traced to the work of Berger & Luckmann (1966) (see, for instance, Van Leeuwen, 2007; Surel, 2000). Berger & Luckmann (1966, p. 111) argue that, in essence, all acts of communication have some kind of legitimating effect:

Legitimation provides the 'explanations' and justifications of the salient elements of the institutional traditions. (It) 'explains' the institutional order by ascribing cognitive validity to its objectivated meanings and (...) justifies the institutional order by giving a normative dignity to its practical imperatives.

The logic underpinning this statement argues that institutions communicate the explanations for their actions. By doing this, they use normative criteria to legitimate whatever it is they were required to do. This process allows for social institutions to normatively justify the things that circumstances required them to do for pragmatic reasons. Van Leeuwen (2007) develops this theory further. First, the author defines legitimation as the answer to the question of 'why' – why should we embark on this



course of action? Or why should this course of action be done in this way? The answer to this question can be made through one of four mechanisms:

- *Authorization* includes references to tradition, custom and law. It is also legitimation by appealing to persons who have institutional authority
- *Moral evaluation* occurs through reference to value systems
- *Rationalization* references the goals and uses of institutionalized social action, and to the knowledge that society uses to impart cognitive validity
- *Mythopoesis*, which is legitimation conveyed through narratives that reward certain actions and punish others.

Each of these mechanisms exists in a range of 'forms'. First, authorization can occur through three forms – custom, authority, or commendation. Custom can be broken down further into conformity, on one hand, and tradition on the other. Conformity-based legitimation occurs when the answer to the 'why' question is 'because that's what everybody else does'. Tradition-based legitimation occurs when the answer to the 'why' question is 'that's what we have always done'. Authority-based legitimation can be broken down into personal authority and impersonal authority. Personal authority is vested in an individual because of their status or role in society or in relation to another actor (i.e. parents authority over their children; teachers' authority over their students). Impersonal authority relates to the legitimate authority of rules, laws, and regulations. Here, the answer to the 'why' question is 'because it's the law', or 'those are the rules' (Van Leeuwen, 2007).

Legitimation based on moral evaluation occurs in three forms – evaluation, abstraction, and comparison. Comparisons can be positive or negative. Positive comparisons serve to legitimize, while negative comparisons serve to de-legitimize. Comparisons do this

through analogies to other activities that are considered either good or bad. Legitimizing language here goes through a process of translation, in which certain activities are recast using the language of another activity or social practice. Van Leeuwen (2007, p. 99) uses the example of Ivan Illich's 1977 critique of schooling, which imports the language of the military and law/order as an attempt to de-legitimise this social practice. Illich (1977, cited in Van Leeuwen, 2007) uses the negative comparison of 'drilling pupils' and 'incarcerating students'. Abstractions link social practices to broader normative discourses. So, if an employee produces work that is not deemed by the manager to be of sufficient quality, the manager might call it an 'opportunity for improvement', rather than bad work. In this way, the manager is drawing on discourses related to quality improvement and worker performance. Finally, legitimation that draws on evaluative techniques 'communicate concrete qualities of actions or objects and commend them in terms of some domain of values' (Van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 98). If a corporation decides to reduce paper waste, we may describe it as 'green' – thus (positively) relating the corporation's actions to values of environmental stewardship.

Legitimation based on rationalization occurs in two main forms – instrumental and theoretical. Drawing on Habermas (1977), Van Leeuwen (2007) refers to instrumental rationality as a form of legitimation that relies on the extent to which a particular social practice works or not. In this way, instrumental rationality has a teleological function – whether something is legitimate depends on the extent to which it meets a certain purpose. On the other hand, theoretical rationalization can be either experiential or scientific. Experiential rationalizations are justified based on 'common sense'. They often take the form of maxims, or moral proverbs. Alternatively, scientific rationalization occurs through reference to specific bodies of knowledge (i.e. physics, psychology, environmental science, etc.).

The final mechanism of legitimation is that of mythopoesis. This is legitimation derived through storytelling. Stories come in different forms. Moral tales are those in which a protagonist is rewarded for restoring the moral order. Cautionary tales are those that convey what will happen if social norms are ignored.

### **MANAGEMENT CONSULTANTS: THE EFFICIENCY EXPERTS**

The case of management consultants can help us understand in more depth the processes through which different forms of expert knowledge are legitimated. As will be shown below, consultants have drawn on very powerful discourses relating to science, management, and efficiency to embed themselves as key actors in the policy process. Because of this, the forms of knowledge that they provide to policymakers have endured regardless of the current populist sentiment against expert knowledge. Indeed, the legitimacy of knowledge provided by management consultants has endured even though there exists high degrees of public scepticism about the value they provide. Consultants have been described as ‘witch doctors’ (Micklethwait & Wooldridge, 1996); or ‘dangerous company’ (O’Shea & Madigan, 1998). Others have hyperbolically argued that consultants ‘plunder the public sector’ (Craig, 2006); or else play ‘con tricks’ (Ashford, 2000). An article appearing in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (Williams, 2013) entitled ‘Are consultants worth the money?’ is emblematic of this phenomenon. Similarly, in the more scholarly literature, a stream of research has emerged that applies a critical lens to the consulting phenomenon (Fincham & Clark, 2002). These critiques often relate the expertise that consultants purport to provide.

In spite of these critiques, management consulting can be seen as one of the great success stories of the modern economy. What began in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a relatively small and specialised vocation providing advice on matters of operational efficiency (Kipping, 1999) has since grown to become one of the world’s

most pervasive and widely used services. The value of the industry is generally considered as being in the billions (Saint-Martin, 1998; Momani, 2013), and many of the large consultancies have experienced significant financial growth over the last few years, even during the global recession. For instance, in 2011, three of the largest consultancies – McKinsey & Co., Boston Consulting Group, and Bain – all grew by 12.4%, 14.5% and 17.3% respectively (The Economist, 2013). Indeed, their ubiquity has led some management scholars to argue that ‘few people, whether in their roles as employees or as citizens, will have avoided the effects of some kind of consultancy-led initiative’ (Fincham & Clark, 2002, p. 1).

As part of this growth, management consultants have focused more and more on working with senior bureaucrats and politicians. While consultants’ public sector work dates back at least to the 1940s (McKenna, 2006), it took on an increased prevalence in light of the new public management (NPM) reforms over the last few decades (Hood, 1991; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2000), so much so that the Management Consulting Association, a peak body for the industry, has argued that the public sector now represents the most important source of income to the major consulting firms (Saint-Martin, 2001). While reports on the total amount spent by governments on consultants vary (Momani, 2013; Speers, 2007) (and, indeed, are often difficult to quantify – see Howlett & Migone, 2013; Ungar, 1991), a number of authors demonstrate that consultants are now a central part of new modes of governance (Lapsley & Oldfield, 2001; Saint-Martin, 2000). And while consultants have typically provided advice on organisational issues (i.e. departmental restructuring, human resources practices, etc.), more and more consultants are providing advice on matters of public policy. Examples include the hiring of management theorist Edward de Bono to resolve Ireland’s currency crisis; the Malaysian Government engaging McKinsey & Co. to design its education ‘blueprint’; or the extensive use of Booz, Allen & Hamilton in the United States’ security

architecture (see also Kantola & Seeck, 2010; Hamilton-Hart, 2006). McKinsey & Co. also reportedly had extensive involvement in the recent redesign of the National Health Service in the United Kingdom. According to some sources, this work included the actual drafting of legislation by the firm (Rose, 2012).

### *Solving the problem of government inefficiency*

The growth and ubiquity of the consulting profession within modern systems of public policy can be seen as a response to the question of government efficiency. Since at least the 19<sup>th</sup> century (and possibly earlier) governments have been criticised as being horrendously inefficient (Downs & Larkey, 1986). Numerous authors, scholars, and professionals have tried to study, and (in some cases) remedy this. For instance, Chester (1948, p. 11) explores the efficiency of the central government of the day, arguing that ‘[f]ew civil servants of seniority and experience can be altogether happy about the efficiency of the central government at the moment’. Likewise, in 1958, McKean attempted to develop a systems analysis approach for improving the overall efficiency of government. More modern scholarship on government efficiency explores, for instance, the relationship of efficiency to voter behaviour (Helland & Sorensen, 2015); critiques the roles of political and budget institutions in bringing about efficient government (Borge et. al., 2008); or uses efficiency as an independent variable to test the choices public administrators make when structuring public institutions (Hooghe & Marks, 2009).

To understand in more detail how consultants’ have responded to questions about government efficiency, it is necessary to trace the history of the profession. The management consulting industry has its origins in the growth of the scientific management movement, which is generally associated with the work of Frederick Winslow Taylor in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Indeed, Taylor was

primarily concerned with increasing the efficiency of factory processes. In 1878, Taylor commenced work as a labourer with Midvale Steel. He rose quickly through the ranks and in six years became the chief engineer at the firm. While in this role, Taylor estimated that worker output was about one-third of where it could be. To rectify this, Taylor felt that the overall incentive structures at the factory needed to be reconfigured, and so he set out to 'scientifically' determine the best way to do this, through what were called the time study experiments. These experiments had two main components – analytic and constructive. As part of the analytical component, each process was broken down into as simple an elemental unit as possible. Units that did not contribute to the overall process were removed. The worker who was most skilled at each elemental unit was then assigned to work on that unit. As part of the constructive component, Taylor recorded the movements and times used on other kinds of work. This allowed the analytical component to be exported to other factory processes. Through these two processes, scientific management postulated that worker efficiency could be maximised (Wren, 2009).

The time study experiments have come to be considered as one of the foundations of 'scientific' management. In this way, a desire to better understand and grapple with the notion of efficiency forms the core of the paradigm. This focus on efficiency, and the appropriate ways in which it could be achieved, were then spread through a small but committed cohort of Taylor's colleagues. This cohort included Carl Barth, H.L. Gantt, Frank & Lillian Gilbreth, and Harrington Emerson (amongst others). Many (though not all) of them set up their own private consultancies designed to commercialise Taylorist ideas and principles. All of them published and taught on the topic. These endeavours were the first step towards establishing scientific management as an entrenched idea in many of the organisations with whom these founders worked. In this way, the scientific management movement helped spread the 'gospel of efficiency' (Wren, 2009).

### *Spreading the gospel of efficiency*

This 'gospel' seemed the perfect solution to the complex and ongoing problem of government efficiency, particularly in the early decades of the twentieth century. Because of this, senior government decision-makers at the time called on the founders of scientific management to help them improve their own operations. For instance, American President Theodore Roosevelt placed the notion of national efficiency high on the national agenda. Taylor himself was called before a national committee to testify on how to improve national efficiency. Similarly, Harrington Emerson testified to a House committee on Taylorism (Wren, 2009). Emerson also served as one of the experts on the Hoover Committee. This committee was one of a long series of different government commissions that explored ways to improve the overall administration of the executive branch. Other commissions included the Cockrell Committee (1888), the Dockery Commission (1893), the Taft Commission (1910), and the Brown Commission (1920) (McKenna, 2006). In the United Kingdom, policymakers also drew on the notion of scientific management in their 'quest' for national efficiency (Searle, 1971, p. 102). In this way, scientific management has been part of government administration almost since the inception of the movement.

The supposedly entrenched problem of government inefficiency, combined with the fact that government was already familiar with, and amenable to, the 'scientific' ideas espoused by management consultants, meant that these companies were in a prime position to provide specialised advice on ways to improve public administration. Because of this, management consultants continued to work with governments throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For instance, during World War II, Booz, Fry, Allen & Hamilton completed a number of projects for the United States Government, including a survey of the Navy's East Coast shipyards; a reorganization of the Office of Naval Operations; and advice on

how the Navy could establish its own internal consulting departments. Likewise, in 1952, upon being elected, President Eisenhower engaged McKinsey & Company for advice on the most appropriate people to appoint to his Executive Branch (McKenna, 2006). In Britain, many of the ideas included in the final report of the 1968 Fulton Committee on the Civil Service have been suggested as being taken directly from the management consultancy that provided advice to the committee. In Canada, the 1960 Glassco Commission on Government Re-organization has been described as 'by far the most impressive demonstration of the influence of consultants in government' (Saint-Martin, 1998, p. 321; Garrett, 1972; Hodgetts, 1973).

The ongoing role that consultants have played in the administration of government was further entrenched by broader, macro-level shifts to neo-liberalism. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Thatcher Government (in the United Kingdom) and the Reagan Government (in the United States) came to power with an ideological commitment to improving social welfare and human freedom through neo-liberal policies. This ultimately meant the retreat, as far as possible, of the state from the realm of private business; strengthening of private property rights; and the valorisation of private enterprise. Central to neo-liberal thought is the concept of the 'market'. In this view, the most efficient social outcome is achieved when different firms compete for consumers. Therefore, like the scientific management movement, neo-liberalism has, at its core, a fundamental concern with efficiency. This meant that neo-liberalism and scientific management were two sides of the same equation. If neo-liberalism constructed the problems that were to be solved, and the acceptable ways in which those problems could be solved, then scientific management provided the answers. And, hence, management consultants become key carriers of solutions to some of the problems facing the governments of the day.



### *Consultants and the new public management*

This privileging of the knowledge provided by management consultants to the public sector was also expressed in the new public management (NPM) reforms of the 1980s and 1990s. In a highly cited paper, Hood (1991, p. 4) outlines the central principles of the NPM, being:

- 'Hands on professional management in the public sector
- Explicit standards and measures of performance
- Greater emphasis on output controls
- Shift to disaggregation of units in the public sector
- Shift to greater competition in the public sector
- Stress on private-sector styles of management practice
- Stress on greater discipline and parsimony in resource use'.

As Hood and others (Merkle, 1980; Pollitt, 1990) have argued, these principles are a direct perpetuation of scientific management. For instance, performance measures can be linked directly to Taylor's piece-rate system. This system assumes that there is an innate variability in employee efficiency. Because of this, workers should be paid relative to the amount of output they produce, as a function of time (i.e. their overall efficiency). In this system, those who reach a certain pre-defined output will be rewarded. Those who don't reach that output won't receive the same rewards. Likewise, the notion of disaggregation of units is reminiscent of Taylor's time motion study, in which labour is divided up into the smallest unit of management possible.

Consultants' expertise on not only efficiency, but scientific management more broadly, meant that the extent of their use increased extensively during the life of the NPM (and ever since). This is illustrated in Table 1 (on the next page).

The NPM thus represented an extensive reconfiguration of the public service and a change in the art of governing. As part of this reconfiguration, management consultants moved closer to the core of the state and became policy actors in their own right. For instance, after Fulton, consultants were seconded directly to Britain's Civil Service Department. After this department was abolished, consultants then moved to smaller units attached to the Cabinet Office, and thus had direct access to the inner circles of policy-making (Saint-Martin, 1998, p. 325). To illustrate, following the 'staff for favours' scandal in the United Kingdom, one consultant (who was seconded to the United Kingdom Treasury) was quoted as saying:

I did work on policy issues and got amazing access ... it is now much easier for me to ring up Treasury officials and get the information I need (Barnett, 2000).

**Table 1: Expenditure on management consultants by U.K. Central Government Departments, 1993 - 2006**

	1993 (£m)	2006 (£m)	% change
Defence	55.6	256.3	361.1%
Environment	7.3	163.0	2,132.9%
Health	4.7	125.0	2,559.6%
Home office	3.8	125.0	3,189.5%
International development	0.2	256.2	1,280%

*(Source: Cabinet Office, 1994; National Audit Office, 2006, cited in Lapsley, 2009)*

As part of this, the NPM placed consulting firms in a position to develop more and more services that were appropriate for public sector clients. This meant that the consulting firms began to provide what might more appropriately be called policy (as opposed to strictly management) advice. For instance, in 1975 the Boston Consulting Group (BCG) provided advice to the UK Secretary of State for Industry on *Strategy Alternatives for the British Motorcycle Industry* (Kipping & Saint-Martin, 1995), which was designed to prevent an entire industry (rather than an individual firm) from losing profitability. Similarly, the ideas of business scholar and management consultant Michael Porter have been adopted in a wide variety of countries as a basis for their national competitiveness policies (Kantola & Seeck, 2011). Further, Kitay & Wright (2004) show how Fred Hilmer, who worked with McKinsey & Company for many years, was instrumental in designing the current employee relations paradigm in Australia.

Traditionally, the bulk of consulting work was done with private sector clients. This work lent itself well to advice and recommendations that could be derived directly out of the principles of scientific management, as well as other bodies of knowledge (i.e. accounting) and more discrete processes (i.e. total quality management, business process re-engineering, etc.). The public sector also was in a position to benefit from these forms of knowledge, insofar as large government departments are often in need of advice on ways in which to, for instance, restructure their internal reporting mechanisms, or else re-design performance management systems. At the same time, the kinds of knowledge, skills and experience upon which this new policy-centric advice could be based were very different. While management consultancies had always given advice on what some might consider more 'traditional' managerial matters (i.e. organisational restructures, performance pay schemes, establishment of project management offices, etc.), the nature of the knowledge that they were being asked to supply to government was very different. Because of this, consultancies sought to employ people with backgrounds in public

policy and public administration to allow them to access (and thus sell) these new kinds of knowledge.

A good example here is the hiring of Sir Michael Barber by McKinsey & Company. Mr Barber served under former British Prime Minister Tony Blair. During Blair's first term, Barber worked as chief advisor to the Secretary of State for Education. During Blair's second term Barber served as Chief Advisor on Delivery, writing his well-regarded book, *Instruction to Deliver*, shortly thereafter. Upon leaving government, Barber joined McKinsey & Company as partner and head of the firm's Global Education Practice. During this time, Barber produced a number of influential (though controversial) public reports, including *From Good to Great: How the world's most improved school systems keep getting better* (Mourshed, Chijioke, & Barber, 2012).

Being able to access policy-relevant knowledge also did two things. First, it provided consultants with more direct access to policymakers, insofar as hiring a former government executive provided the consultancies with a passage point to that executive's relationships, as well as her or his reputation within policy circles. It also paved the way for consultancies to begin to establish their own not-for-profits specifically designed to provide research, advice and recommendations on significant social issues. Indeed, organisations like BCG's *Centre for Public Impact*, or the *McKinsey Global Institute* have been established to, for instance, 'improve the positive impact of government' (Centre for Public Impact, 2015) or 'help leaders in the commercial, public, and social sectors develop a deeper understanding of the evolution of the global economy and to provide a fact base that contributes to decision making on critical management and policy issues' (McKinsey Global Institute, 2015). This 'think-tankization' (Saint-Martin, 2013) of the major consultancies has further entrenched them as significant policy actors, or, as

Accenture (a prominent consultancy) describes it, ‘partners in governance’ (Beveridge, 2012, p. 50). An extract taken from the Accenture website is illustrative:

Citizens now expect government to be more like the 24/7 world of the private sector – more efficient, and always aligned with the people it serves. And government needs a partner who will help improve the way it serves citizens ... Accenture is that partner (Saint-Martin, 2013).

## **CONSULTANTS AND THE LEGITIMATION OF EXPERTISE**

It is clear that consultants are now a central part of modern systems of governance. It is also clear that the advice provided by those consultants to government is wide-ranging – it not only includes advice on issues related to management of government organisations, but also advice on policy issues. In this way, consultants have established and maintained their legitimacy as experts in spite of recent (populist) sentiment against expertise. To understand how this has occurred, it is necessary to explore the discursive mechanisms of legitimation adopted by consultants. I argue that consultant expertise has been legitimated through all four mechanisms identified by Van Leeuwen – authorization, moral evaluation, rationalization, and mythopoesis. I also argue that, through these mechanisms, consultants have institutionalised discourses related to efficiency, science, and management.

### *Moral evaluation*

First, the discussion in the previous section demonstrates that governments have used management consultants to improve the overall efficiency of their operations. The justification for this is that efficiency as a goal is inherently right – that it should be pursued as an intrinsic good. Much of the macro-level shifts that have been described in the previous section (i.e. neo-liberalism, NPM, etc.) take as their starting point a view

that society and, particularly, government, is inefficient and that we can rectify this through the adoption of a range of different government programs and policies. However, whether we *should* do this is not something is not raised as a question. Rather, the pursuit of efficiency is taken as given, and social practices are arranged to achieve this.

There may be many reasons why efficiency is not, of itself, something that should be pursued. The often-cited trade off between efficiency and equity is one example. Some policy outcomes may be considered efficient, insofar as they allocate resources at minimal cost. At the same time, they may produce outcomes that disproportionately affect certain sections of society. A tax on cigarettes may be efficient, insofar as it requires smokers to cover health costs that would otherwise be borne by society. However, if most smokers are from disadvantaged backgrounds, then the tax will disproportionately affect those people. In this way, we can say that a tax on smokers is efficient, but not equitable. Where there is a choice between efficiency and equity, it is ultimately the politicians that make this choice. That is, it is politicians that decide on how policies are designed and implemented. If, as others have previously argued, politics is the 'authoritative allocation of values' (Easton, 1965), then the decision between equity and efficiency becomes a value judgement. Likewise, as Searle (1971, p. 101) shows, introduction of a national efficiency policy in Britain in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was met with 'open political resistance', suggesting that the pursuit of efficiency (or otherwise) was based on the extent to which efficiency as a goal aligned with people's political values.

Here, we can identify the legitimating mechanism of moral evaluation. Legitimation through moral evaluation occurs when a particular actor attempts to legitimise their behaviour or words through appeal to broader social values. In this case, management

consultants have legitimised their expertise through their appeal to the value of efficiency. Indeed, if it is accepted that efficiency is a core value in our social and political systems, then casting themselves as experts in efficiency has legitimised consultants as key actors in modern systems of public policy.

### *Rationalization*

The second way in which consultants have discursively legitimized themselves is through a process of rationalization. Rationalization can occur through either instrumental rationalization, or theoretical rationalization. Actors are able to instrumentally legitimise themselves when they are able to demonstrate how a particular ends will be achieved. Theoretical legitimacy occurs when actors are able to draw on specific bodies of knowledge to justify their words and behaviours.

In the case of management consultants, instrumental rationalization has occurred through deployment of their skills as managers, or, at the very least, through representing to policymakers that their knowledge of 'how to manage' can help solve the problems facing policymakers. The key word here is 'representing'. Indeed, there is a stream of research from the management science literature that shows that consultants have constructed themselves as problem solvers *par excellence*. This literature argues that consultants construct themselves as obligatory passage points (Callon, 1986; Bloomfield & Danieli, 1995; Bloomfield & Best, 1992) – that is, they shape an identity for themselves as the best (or only) way to fix a particular problem. Similarly, Bloomfield & Best (1992) argue that consultants construct the problems of their clients in ways that post their solutions as the sole answer to their client's problem(s).

Here, again, we can identify a source of consultant legitimating devices. Since the very early days of the industry, management consultants have constructed an identity for themselves as the solution to problems of efficiency. By applying the scientific

management techniques of Taylor, consultants have constructed notions of themselves as efficiency experts. Over time, this construction has been institutionalized, allowing consultants to become a central actor and, more to the point, a crucial expert, in matters of both public policy and public administration. In this way, consultants have legitimized themselves instrumentally.

Consultants have also used a form of theoretical rationalization to legitimize themselves. Here, legitimation has occurred through scientific rationalization. Indeed, the basis for consultants' expertise comes from their supposed command over 'scientific' management. If organisational processes could be broken down into the smallest elemental units, then they can be controlled and, ultimately, managed. In this way, scientific management has come to be a tool that decision-makers can use to reduce an uncertain and complex world into something simple, and, therefore, knowable.

Moreover, scientific management has been described as a 'rhetorical construction', or a 'creole hybrid' that draws on different bodies of knowledge. In this way, consultants have legitimized themselves through reference to otherwise legitimate bodies of knowledge.

### *Authorization*

Consultants also use forms of personal authorization to legitimate themselves. This is most clearly done through hiring individuals who have become an authority in areas germane to the work of consultants. Michael Barber is a good example here. As discussed above, Mr. Barber had worked for many years in the British public sector, most notably as an advisor to Tony Blair. He had spent many years advising on education policy, and had produced practice-oriented books related to improving the delivery of public programs. This work had cemented Mr. Barber's role as something of an authority, both in the education sector, as well as in improving government service-



delivery more generally. By hiring Mr. Barber (and people like him), consultancies have been able to legitimize their activities.

### *Mythopoesis*

Finally, consultant expertise has been legitimated through a form of storytelling. This has occurred by combining discourses into a compelling narrative. The discourses that consultants have drawn on are those of efficiency, science, and management. All three discourses have been described previously, and, as others have shown in detail, all three are pervasive in society today (see, for instance, Aronowitz, 1988; Davis, 1985; Thrift, 2005). What is crucial for the purpose of this discussion is that consultants have combined all three into a storyline that describes the cause-and-effect relationships between them. The first relationship that consultants have been able to establish is between science and management. This occurred through the inception of the scientific management movement. Taylor and his colleagues argued that a more systematic approach to defining and reviewing worker performance could enhance productivity of those workers. The systematicity of this approach was the basis of its 'scientific' character, and, hence, scientific management was born. At the same time, consultants argued that scientific management was the answer to the problems of inefficiency facing society at the time. In other words, if inefficiency was the problem, then scientific management was the solution. In this way, consultants produced a storyline through the combining different discourses. This storyline was particularly attractive to government decision-makers wrestling with how to improve the efficiency of their own operations. More to the point, it described a relatively simple cause-and-effect relationship that policymakers have been able to use and adapt to solve (or, at least, attempt to solve) the problems facing them.

So, policymakers have accepted the storyline told by consultants. It has thus become a compelling narrative. In addition, this narrative has been institutionalized. That is, it has come to shape the kinds of practices and behaviors that have become pervasive in modern forms of public management. The most obvious example of this phenomenon is the NPM reforms of the 1990s. These reforms were concerned with creating a more efficient public sector through the introduction of private sector management practices. Consultants were key conduits of these reforms, as well as beneficiaries. The management styles, techniques, and approaches introduced by consultants have now become an intrinsic part of government operations. Government departments now speak in terms of 'performance management', 'key performance indicators', 'outcomes' and 'outputs'. These terms have traditionally been associated with more 'scientific' approaches to management. And so we can identify processes of discourse institutionalization, specifically brought about by management consultants.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper has argued that management consultants have become a crucial part of modern systems of public policy. It has also argued that the expertise provided by consultants has been, and continues to be, legitimate. To do this, the paper has traced the history of consultants' interaction with government. It has shown how consultants have established themselves as 'efficiency experts' and that, by doing this, they have placed themselves in a position to not only solve problems of public management, but problems of public policy. The paper then demonstrates the mechanisms through which this has occurred. It has shown that consultant legitimacy has occurred through authorization, rationalization, moral evaluation, and mythopoesis.

By doing this, the paper has demonstrated that legitimation of expertise is fundamentally a discursive process. The concept of legitimation is generally recognized in the policy

literature as a function of the kinds of knowledge presented by experts. That is, expert knowledge is used to legitimate the arguments made by politicians and policymakers. However, what is less clear is the processes through which this occurs. In this way, legitimation through expert knowledge is somewhat of a 'black box'. By drawing on the insights from critical discourse analysis, particularly the work of Van Leeuwen, the paper has been able to articulate how legitimation occurs. Moreover, it provides a basis upon which we can explain why policymakers consider certain forms of expertise (and not others) as legitimate. That is, legitimate forms of knowledge are those that have been able to support their own legitimacy through the four mechanisms outlined in this paper.

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