MANAGEMENT CONSULTING: TOWARDS AN INTEGRATIVE FRAMEWORK OF KNOWLEDGE, IDENTITY, AND POWER

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Abstract

This paper reviews the past 28 years of scholarship on management consulting to synthesize the field and establish more broadly its contribution to management research. Through a systematic review of 219 articles, we identify three core conceptual themes—knowledge, identity, and power—that have dominated the literature to date. Through a thematic inductive analysis of a subsection of articles, we then investigate how these themes have been defined, used, and linked. This allows us to uncover and problematize the relationships between these themes. In making explicit underlying theoretical assumptions and relationships between knowledge, identity and power, we induce a unique framework that can guide and support future studies, instigate metaparadigmatic dialogue and thus help consolidate the field.

Keywords: Management consulting; knowledge; identity; power; systematic literature review

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Introduction

Following the exponential growth in the 1990s of the management consulting sector, which by 2018/2019 generated revenues of US$634 billion and employed more than 4.3 million people globally (IBISWorld 2019), academic interest in management consulting has increased dramatically, with a series of dedicated books, special issues, and a distinguished group of scholars contributing to the debates (Armbrüster 2006b; Clark and Kipping 2012; McKenna 2004; Sturdy et al. 2015). The proliferation of academic research has led to a rich and fragmented field that is dispersed across publication outlets and preoccupied with a diverse range of topics encompassing a wide variety of theoretical perspectives (Armbrüster 2006a; Kipping and Clark 2012; Mohe et al. 2011; Sturdy et al. 2004). This richness and theoretical diversity drove our initial exploration of the literature and motivated our focus on the identification of dominant conceptual themes (e.g., knowledge, identity) that span research paradigms. While theoretical diversity often enriches our understanding of a complex phenomenon, such as consulting (see, for example, Armbrüster 2006a), it may also simultaneously hinder discourse across theoretical boundaries (Deetz 1996; Lewis and Grimes 1999) and obscure overall contributions to the field (Rousseau et al. 2008). For instance, a given conceptual theme (e.g., power) may be extensively investigated in one stream of studies (e.g., critically inspired studies of consulting) and ignored in others (Lewis and Grimes 1999). We seek to demonstrate that by focusing on how these themes are analyzed across research streams, we can problematize the literature, challenge its assumptions and provide an alternative way to think about management consulting.

While we build on previous reviews of the field (e.g., Armbrüster 2006b; Fincham and Clark 2002a), we move away from prior paradigmatic categorizations of the literature (e.g., ‘functionalist’ vs. ‘critical’) to provide a ‘metaparadigmatic’ map. The map is metaparadigmatic in the sense that it looks across paradigms to create links and to instigate conceptual dialogues between distant streams of management consulting studies, providing ‘a more holistic view that transcends paradigm distinctions to reveal disparity and complementarity’ (Lewis and Grimes 1999, p. 673). This approach is well suited to reviewing a theoretically diverse literature, as it allows a more engaged conversation about specific themes and concepts across multiple paradigms (for a similar approach, see Corlett et al. 2015).

In analyzing systematically and developing a thematic coding of the content of previous studies across the diverse field of management consulting, we aim to deliver a threefold contribution to organization and management theory. First, we offer an up-to-date, reproducible, and consolidated management consulting research overview that identifies recent shifts and emerging trends in the past 28 years, while establishing its contribution to management research more generally. Second, based on the detailed inductive analysis of the content of 113 articles, we construct a unique metaparadigmatic framework that offers an alternative way to understand the field and can be used for theoretical, empirical, and practical purpose. By looking at how prior studies conceptualize three core themes (i.e., knowledge, identity, and power), we problematize the literature by making explicit paradigmatic assumptions. We use these three themes to identify patterns that span across paradigms and conflicting understandings. In so doing, in ways that have implications for contemporary work, we seek to change the way we think about the phenomenon of consulting in relation to knowledge, identity and power. Third and finally, by using this unique framework, we create bridges across distinct research paradigms and at a metaparadigmatic level enable the cross-fertilization and dialogue about knowledge, identity and power and their relationships in the consultancy literature. In so doing, we offer a renewed research agenda.

Consolidating research on management consulting

Responsible for the re-establishment of McKinsey in 1939 and strongly associated with its subsequent success, it was Marvin Bower, who first used the term ‘management consulting’ (McKenna 2006). Since then, the term has become broad (Furusten 2009), and no generally accepted definition has emerged (Fincham et al. 2013; Glückler and Armbrüster 2003). Following the classifications of Kubr (2002) and Sturdy (2011), the term may describe providing assistance in a broad sense (Fincham et al. 2013; Furusten 2009) or, more precisely, it may refer to the distinctive role, the organization, and the identity of consultants (Fincham and Clark 2002b; Kipping and Kirkpatrick 2013; Kitay and Wright 2007). This latter approach defines management consulting as a ‘service contracted for and provided to organizations by specially trained and qualified persons who assist, in an objective and independent manner, the client organization to identify management problems, analyze such problems, recommend solutions to these problems, and help, when requested, in the implementation of solutions’ (Greiner and Metzger, 1983, p. 7). We take this definition as the basis of our investigation.

Towards the constitution of the field

Academic interest in management consulting lagged the development of the sector. While management consultancy can trace its origins back to the Taylorist movement of the early 1900s (Kipping 1997; Wright and Kipping 2012), it was not until the end of the 1950s that academics started to show interest in the phenomenon, although consultants themselves had begun writing about their work somewhat earlier (Armenakis and Burdg 1988). The authors of the first academic articles came either from social psychology (Havelock 1971) or from the organizational development (OD) and process consulting tradition (Argyris 1970; Schein 1969). This largely prescriptive body of work, the so-called ‘orthodox’ (also labeled ‘functionalist’) consulting literature, remained dominant until the mid-1980s (Fincham 1999). In these early days, the practitioners generally had a more extensive and practical knowledge of strategic management, and their expertise was incorporated into the academic discourse as a ‘quasi-scientific element’ (Nicolai and Röbken 2005, p. 417). Consultants were viewed by this prescriptive managerialist literature as collaborative facilitators and experts, working in harmony with their clients to help them achieve organizational development and change (Fincham 1999; Sturdy et al. 2009b).

From the 1990s, the emergence of critical academic voices began to transform the evolution and focus of the field. Critical management scholars started to question the supposedly collaborative nature of consulting (Clark 1995; Fincham and Clark 2002b; Sturdy 1997) and disputed the professional status of the industry and consultants’ knowledge claims, as well as their effectiveness and value in achieving change (Alvesson 1993; Fincham and Clark 2002a). They drew attention to the ambiguous role consultants play in disseminating management fashions and fads (Abrahamson 1996; Benders et al. 1998).

By the 2000s, the scholarship had reached a new level of understanding as a result of a range of debates and tensions that developed in the literature, enriching the prescriptive managerialist versus the critical categorization of the field.[1] Scholars started to identify and accept the situational nature of consulting (Furusten 2009; Glückler and Armbrüster 2003), the diversity of the actors involved (Alvesson and Robertson 2006; Mohe and Seidl 2011), and the role of the active and increasingly sophisticated client (Höner and Mohe 2009; Reihlen and Nikolova 2010). Since the 2000s, the prescriptive (OD and practitioner-authored) managerialist literature has mostly disappeared from academic journals, but research conducted from a functionalist

[1] Various authors have categorized these tensions as ones occurring between the functionalist and the critical perspectives of consulting (Armbrüster 2006b; Werr and Styhre 2002), between OD, critical (Fincham and Clark 2002b) and neoinstitutional literatures (Furusten 2009), and between the strategic and the structural critical views (Faust 2012; Fincham 1999).

perspective (deductive positivist) has remained. Currently, the two theoretical perspectives, functionalist and critical, continue to exist in parallel, occupying a shared space in the top generalist management journals.

The status of the literature is as debated as the status of consulting itself (Kipping 2011; Kirkpatrick et al. 2012). Various aspects point towards some form of, albeit contested, consolidation in the field. One indication has been the establishment of the Management Consulting division in the Academy of Management in 1971. This might have signaled the constitution of consulting literature as a field. However, assembling the community of practitioners and 'academic consultants', the division's orientation has remained explicitly practical, and the structuring of the literature into a coherent field has not ensued. Research on consulting is still fragmented across disciplines (Armbrüster 2006a; Kipping and Clark 2012) and publication outlets (Mohe et al. 2011). Our review shows that compared to the number of articles that focus on consulting as a setting—aiming to understand other complex organizational phenomena—, the number of articles that study consulting on its own right has increased. This increasing focus on consulting points towards the legitimization of management consulting research as a field and suggests that some form of consensus is developing over the meanings and accepted approaches in researching the field (Pfeffer 1993; Wood and Logsdon 2016). This rich body of consulting research has been authored by an increasingly established group of researchers (Fincham et al. 2013; Kipping and Clark 2012). The *Oxford Handbook of Management Consulting* was published in 2012 (Clark and Kipping 2012), further strengthening both explicitly and implicitly the narrative of consulting as a field of research. In its introduction, Kipping and Clark (2012) note that since the 1990s, 'academic research on management consulting [has] come into its own, that is, it has treated the industry and its rapid growth as a phenomenon worthy of examination per se' (p. 16). Dedicated books and special issues have paved the way towards this development, providing narration and in so doing, helping to constitute this field.

Prior attempts at consolidating the literature

In seeking to develop a renewed framework to analyze the literature, we build on previous reviews that have mapped out the terrain, but we also show how they were constrained in their categorization and hence problematization of the field. Table 1 provides a summary of these studies.

Insert Table 1 about here

Most reviews of management consulting studies are ‘narrative reviews’, seeking to provide an informal organization of the literature (Hammersley 2001; Jones and Gatrell 2014). Narrative reviews are informal in a sense that they remain implicit in their review methodology and choose studies as examples to illustrate specific points rather than to comprehensively survey the field (Tranfield et al. 2003). A number of these reviews take the form of an introduction to special issues (e.g., Fincham and Clark 2002b; Fincham et al. 2013; Sturdy, Werr, et al. 2009) and to dedicated books (e.g., Armbrüster 2006a; Kipping and Clark 2012; Sturdy, Handley, et al. 2009). Without aiming to be systematic or comprehensive, these introductions tend to focus on a specific segment of the literature they are commenting on (i.e., uncertainty, clients). Most of these reviews provide a historical account of consulting research and represent the field by categorizing it along functionalist (prescriptive managerialist) and critical paradigms. In organizing the field along these lines, they risk reifying these paradigms (Deetz 1996; Willmott 1993), whereby historical classification becomes more necessary than the dissection of the differences and similarities of the underlying assumptions (for an exception, see Armbrüster 2006a).

A few formal reviews have been published to account for the field. Drawing on illustrative articles from eight top management journals, the oldest formal literature review of the field was published in 1988. It argued for more scientific research on consulting and a move away from experience-based writing (Armenakis and Burdg 1988). The next formal review of the field followed twenty years later, when O'Mahoney and colleagues (2008) set out to examine the extent to which key industry concerns (e.g., strategic change, procurement) are addressed by academic research. Their review focused on these practitioner themes that they identified a priori, which means that their focus was constrained to the academic-practitioner gap. Within these themes, they identified areas where academic research lagged practice and suggested moving towards more useful, normative queries. Mohe and colleagues' (2011) review of consulting research between 1990 and 2008 was the first that systematically analyzed the literature to identify key trends. They found that qualitative approaches dominated a theoretically heterogeneous field that was organized around 5 themes: the historical and geographical development of the industry; the factors of success; the functions of consultants; HRM; and the education of consultants. A more recent review by Cerruti and colleagues (2019) summarizes the main streams of the literature between 1971 and 2017 and stress the functional versus critical view of consulting.

These formal reviews provide a more comprehensive outlook of the field. They either demonstrate the theoretical diversity of the field (Faust 2012; Mohe et al. 2011) or point towards its theoretical potential (Armbrüster 2006a). This approach could have moved the mapping of the field beyond the functionalist-critical divide; however, categorization along paradigms remains the norm in the field (see Cerruti et al. 2019). While formal reviews provide rich insight into the development of the literature, within the field, they do not help us see emerging and potentially interesting connections that could offer new research perspectives. We propose that the next stage in the evolution of this field is to focus on conceptual commonalities by adopting a metaparadigmatic approach that cuts across or spans existing paradigms (Lewis and Grimes 1999). In so doing, we can show whether and how similar notions are defined, theorized, and empirically operationalized across multiple paradigms. This different way of presenting the literature can help researchers working on these concepts and being anchored within a paradigmatic tradition learn about, and potentially build on insights from alternative paradigms.

Most of these prior reviews did not propose a future agenda for consulting research. They tended to evaluate the current state of literature by providing repertoires of key themes in the literature, and they concluded that more in-depth empirical analysis is needed to advance understanding. There are two exceptions. Armbrüster (2006a) based his suggestions for future research on main theorizations (institutional, transaction cost, signaling, and embeddedness theories) he identified in the field and to increase our understanding of the phenomenon of consulting, suggested extending these through other frameworks, for example, game theory and the economics of certification. Sturdy (2012) examined industry trends and methodological approaches to identify gaps in the literature and provided a list of questions to study (e.g., limits to growth, cross-national variations, link between nature of knowledge and professionalization). He also claimed that 'while research over the last twenty or so years has shed considerable light on consultancy as a phenomenon, in many respects, it has barely touched the surface' (Sturdy 2012, p. 468). We argue that this is partly because of the lack of problematization of 'what we know and do not know' (Rousseau et al. 2008) in the field (see Cerruti et al. 2019 for a most recent attempt). To this end, to contribute to theoretical development, we adopt a metaparadigmatic perspective that entails examining how knowledge is generated by scholars in the field across paradigms (Lewis and Grimes 1999; Tsoukas and Knudsen 2005). This helps us problematize the literature and suggest future directions in a novel way. We now turn to discussing the methodology we followed in our analysis.

Methodology: Combining a systematic review with an inductive thematic analysis

To examine the development of the management consultancy literature over the past 28 years, we combined the techniques of systematic literature reviewing (SLR) (Denyer and Tranfield 2009) and thematic inductive analysis (Gioia et al. 2012). Figure 1 summarizes the process we followed in selecting journals and papers on which we based our two-phase analysis.

Insert Figure 1 about here

We first identified which academic outlets were most dominant within this body of literature. We located relevant journals through searching an electronic library database, referring to journal quality ratings (e.g., *Financial Times* Research Rank, ABS Academic Journal Guide 2015), cross-referencing findings by using Google Scholar, and seeking recommendation from six distinguished scholars of management consulting. This exercise resulted in the selection of 22 journals (see Table 2).[2]

Insert Table 2 about here

The initial keyword search within these journals returned 755 articles that were then cleaned for duplicates. We read the full papers, and articles not relevant for the literature were excluded based on the following conditions: the articles mentioned consulting in passing; the articles

[2] Consistent with an approach that has been deemed appropriate due to the influence of management journals, we excluded books, book chapters, and non-academic publications from the review (Podsakoff et al. 2005). Nevertheless, much significant work on consulting has been published in books that we did not want to exclude from our analysis. Based on expert advice, we therefore used a number of key books in the field to aid our problematization and agenda setting.

referred to research conducted by consultants; consulting was one of many settings included in the articles; and consulting-specific issues were not examined explicitly in the articles. We retained papers that studied both consulting as a context and consulting as a phenomenon in its own right. This is consistent with our aim to identify research that is part of and contributes to the consulting literature rather than studies that simply use management consulting as one of many contexts in which to investigate a range of management phenomena. A total of 219 articles were ultimately incorporated in the SLR. The research interest remained sporadic in the 1990s, and with a surge of special issues, the number of articles only started to increase dramatically from 2001. Figure A1 in Appendix 1 shows how these publications are distributed over time.

Stage 1: Systematic literature review

We first identified key characteristics of the literature in terms of research types, methods, and themes by reviewing papers in full and recording our results in a database. Research led by theory increased radically in the 2000s, with authors drawing dominantly on the discipline of sociology. However, the literature remained fragmented, encompassing a wide variety of perspectives (e.g., institutional theory and social identity theory). Empirical research dominated: a total of 57 papers were conceptual, and 162 were results of empirical research. Of the empirical studies, 128 (79%) were qualitative. The individual consultant remained the focus of the research; only 6% of the articles addressed the phenomenon across micro and macro levels. In terms of methodology, the analysis of texts and projects increased, with case studies being the most preferred method. Interviews continued to be the prevalent data collection technique, but participant and non-participant observation have increased from the 2000s.

To identify the most dominant themes, we recorded the main topics for each article in a database and aggregated them into larger themes representing key concepts. To aid our recognition of the key topic of an article, we directed our focus on the title, abstract, and keywords of each article. Figure A2 in Appendix 1 online describes this process of topic integration, showing how we moved from twelve topics to three overarching themes corresponding to knowledge, identity, and power.[3] Table A1 in Appendix 1 online demonstrates these overarching themes including the concepts, which received less attention.

Stage 2: Thematic inductive analysis

Through the SLR, we were able to identify characteristics, from which we refocused our attention on prevalent themes that represented the core of this literature. We specified our research question to focus on the following: *How did academics address knowledge, identity, and power in their studies on consultants?* To answer this question, we conducted a thematic inductive analysis (Gioia et al. 2012) as part of our literature review. We selected articles that addressed the three themes either in their empirical findings, discussions, or theoretical sections. Our aim was to investigate the conceptualization of the themes in the generalist management and organization studies (MOS) discourse; hence, we only focused on the 18 generalist outlets and excluded the four specialist journals (see Table 2). This also allowed for a more in-depth analysis and the contribution to on-going conversations in MOS.

The content of 113 articles was systematically analyzed in NVivo by using inductive first and second order coding (Gioia et al. 2012), consistent with analytical techniques in grounded theorizing (Glaser and Strauss 1967)[4]. In this open-ended analysis, we traveled back and forth

[3] We were interested in the overall prevalence of themes in management literature in general and did not want to privilege one theme over another. For this reason, we excluded the theme of *organizational change* because it was overrepresented by the *Journal of Organizational Change Management*. Without this specialist outlet, only 5% of the articles centered on this theme in the remaining 21 journals. In comparison, even with the exclusion of *Management Learning*, the journal that solely focuses on different aspects of knowledge, the theme of knowledge was the most dominant, demonstrating the prevalence of this concept in the broader field of management research.

[4] Although the three core themes of knowledge, identity and power were inferred from our prior stage of analysis by deductive means, their actual definition, theorization, problematization, and relationships in the existing literature had yet to be analyzed in depth requiring a more inductive type of analysis. Hence, to arrive to the main findings of the review, our overall methodological approach was abductive (Peirce 1978). Abduction is a form of reasoning

between data (text of articles), literature, and emerging theory. We started by categorizing, in any part of the articles, passages of text in the articles that referred to knowledge, identity, or power. We linked these passages to higher level categories and aggregated them to develop a theoretical framework (Pratt et al. 2006). We first focused on how the three themes were *defined*, which we coded by using the researchers' own terms as in vivo codes. Our higher level categories emerged from the raw data and were theoretically informed, building on literatures of knowledge (Empson 2001b), power (Fleming and Spicer 2014), and identity (Brown 2014). Table 3 notes the ways in which these themes were defined in the analyzed literature.

Insert Table 3 about here

We then compared and contrasted the coded passages to identify *foci*—particular aspects of the theme on which the researchers focused. For example, for the power theme, we categorized raw data related to the *locus of power* (power in individuals, in words, and in management)—see Figure A3-A5 in Appendix 1 online for the detailed categorization for all themes.

Stage 3: Analysis of conceptual themes' interfaces

During our inductive analysis, it became clear that the conceptual themes are often not discussed in isolation but are connected, though sometimes in an implicit manner. These interfaces became our review's focus, on which we also built our framework. We first assigned parts of articles, where any two (31 articles) or all three conceptual themes (14 articles) were discussed, to first order codes. These codes were then reanalyzed and aggregated to more general categories that reflected the theorization of the types of interactions between the themes of knowledge, identity, and power. This coding process resulted in the identification of three key interactions: *influencing*, *resourcing*, and *controlling* (see Figure A6-A9 in Appendix 1 online for this aggregation process

based on existing knowledge (i.e. three most prevalent themes) upon which codes are induced from our empirical data (e.g. definitions, foci) (Ketokivi and Mantere 2010).

for all interactions). We now present our findings relating to the three core themes of knowledge, identity, and power in the management consulting literature and focus on the following: definitions, focus, and theorized interactions.

Exploring knowledge, identity, and power in the consulting literature

To discuss the interfaces between the three core themes and thus enable further investigation, we first need to assess critically how each of the themes has been conceptualized. This metaparadigm review of the different perspectives in the field is necessary to be able to analyze the interfaces between the three themes. In this section, we synthetize and problematize the conceptualization of knowledge, identity, and power in the consulting literature. We first examine how these themes are defined in the literature, and then we analyze the focus of these studies. These analyses represent two separate dimensions along which we review the literature, but they complement each other in revealing how paradigmatic perspectives influence the overall conceptualizations of these themes.

Definitional diversity

Knowledge, identity, and power are three of the most complex and contested themes not only in management theory but also in social science in general. This is fed by the various—often argued as ‘incommensurable’ (Jackson and Carter 1991; Shepherd and Challenger 2013)—paradigmatic perspectives (Burrell and Morgan 1979; Hassard and Cox 2013) through which scholars approach these themes.

Knowledge. Knowledge is at the very core of consulting studies (Reihlen and Nikolova 2010; Richter and Niewiem 2009). However, the very definition of knowledge shows diverse perspectives in the literature. A more functionalist view (Burrell and Morgan 1979) of the literature discusses *knowledge as an asset*. This means that knowledge is a ‘functional resource’ or a commodity (Alvesson 2001, p. 1011; Empson 2001b) that can be exchanged or transferred between organizational actors or aggregated by the firm (Richter and Niewiem 2009). By contrast, a social constructivist perspective that comprises part of the critical literature analyzes *knowing as a process*, whereby knowledge is a social construct disseminated and legitimated through interaction (Empson 2001b). Knowledge, instead of being a fixed 'commodity' to be transferred between actors, is a fluid concept, translated through a process that potentially involves shifts in meaning as it is applied in different contexts (Sturdy, Clark et al. 2009; Werr and Stjernberg 2003). A third perspective on knowledge, also presented within the critical literature, is *knowledge as a rhetorical strategy* (Berglund and Werr 2000). This perspective poses a more fundamental challenge to beliefs about the nature and meaning of knowledge in the context of consulting (Werr 2012). Rhetoric denotes discursive claims, 'elements of argument and persuasion, which may, or may not be backed up by 'facts'' (e.g., expertise) (Alvesson 2001, p. 871), which play a key role in impression management in the client-consultant relationship (Clark 1995). Our review of knowledge in the consulting literature highlights that rhetorical perspectives have been far less dominant in mainstream management journals. These studies imply that power and identity are inherent in these strategies and thus point out the dynamics between these themes. Few examples include research on powerful persuasion tactics and framing that construct client identities (Alvesson 2001; Bloomfield and Danieli 1995) and that constrain the knowledge translation process (Heusinkveld and Benders 2012; Mohe and Seidl 2011).

Identity. The definitions of identity are relatively consistent within the consulting literature, reflecting the fact that these articles form part of the critical literature. The authors in general assume identities to be fluid, fragmented, positive, and performed (Brown 2014). The theme is also studied as something fixed, which means that it considers the identity of consultants, clients, or organizations at one point in time. Articles mainly focus on the practice underlying identity construction and except for a few articles that study identity construction in the recruitment, performance appraisal, and internal career advancement process, they tend to disregard the process of how identity evolves (Bergström et al. 2009; Ibarra 2000). The studies tend to focus on one dominant identity, such as being 'elite' (Alvesson and Robertson 2006; Armbrüster 2004), 'expert' or 'professional' (Fincham 2002; Kärreman and Rylander 2008), having a 'heroic self' (Wright et al. 2012) or an 'enterprising self' (Sturdy and Wright 2008), and 'being a change agent' (Wright et al. 2012). The discussions on identity often note tensions in consultants' identity work caused by the inherently ambiguous environment surrounding consultants (Alvesson and Robertson 2006; Mühlhaus and Bouwmeester 2016). Although these tensions are viewed as being unresolvable, they are not theorized as being *precarious* to one's positive self-meaning (Brown 2014, p. 10). Research have demonstrated 'reciprocal anxiety' between clients and consultants (Sturdy 1997), self-alienation (Costas and Fleming 2009) and status anxiety of consultants stemming from their identification with an elite organizational identity (Gill 2015; O'Mahoney 2007, 2011). However, the literature has not examined in depth the possibility of negative self-meaning and all-consuming insecurities, which may result in long-term mental health problems (Haight 2001) and eventually in consultants losing the battle (Brown 2014).

Power. Our analysis shows that power is the least well-defined of the three themes in the consulting literature (for exceptions, see: Kärreman and Alvesson 2009; Levina and Orlikowski 2009). This is in spite of the fact that 'consulting engagements typically involve extensive negotiation and considerable tension, and as such, offer a particularly valuable window into multiparty power dynamics' (Levina and Orlikowski 2009, p. 672). Classified by nature and manifestation, different forms of power, such as coercion, manipulation, domination, and subjectification (Fleming and Spicer 2014)[5], are all discussed in some form in the literature, but empirical investigations of how they materialize in this context are largely absent. Subjectification, a perspective grounded in Foucauldian thought (Foucault 1975) on how power shapes individuals' sense of identity and selfhood (Fleming and Spicer 2014, p. 244), is an exception: a strand of critical management studies provides empirical analyses of the control of consultants' self (Bergström 2006; Costas et al. 2016). The consulting literature could benefit from analyzing different forms of power for a more nuanced understanding of the diffusion of management ideas (O'Mahoney and Sturdy 2016) and the phenomenon of consulting in general.

Research focus

In addition to defining these three themes, paradigmatic orientations also guide the research focus: what is identified as a relevant empirical problem (Kuhn 1970; Lewis and Grimes 1999). Specifying the focus of these studies will help us dissect the interfaces between these themes in the next stage of our review.

Knowledge cycle. Management consulting has always represented an important empirical context in discussing one particular area of knowledge scholarship, namely, knowledge management (KM) (Werr 2012). As knowledge-intensive firms that primarily compete on expertise (Starbuck 1992), consulting firms became exemplars of best practice (Empson 2001b). The idea of KM became popular in the mid-1990s and can be traced back to the development of technologies to successfully acquire, store, share, retrieve, and use knowledge within an organization (Easterby-Smith and Lyles 2011). This perspective that knowledge can be easily

[5] According to Fleming and Spicer's categorization (2014) drawing on Lukes' work (Lukes 2005), coercion is the direct/observable exercise of power by individuals based on certain factors, for example, position (French and Raven 1959) or resources (Salancik and Pfeffer 1974). Manipulation is the inclusion and exclusion of issues discussed within an organization (Selznick 1948). Domination is changing people's perceptions through ideology (Lukes 2005), and subjectification refers to the control of one's identity by discourse or organizational systems (Foucault 1977).

captured, transferred, and in general managed, is in line with the previously discussed functionalist view of knowledge. Our review demonstrates that views on knowledge are more varied in the literature; hence we cannot limit our focus to KM alone (see Werr 2012 for a comprehensive overview). KM, even in its broader sense, only captures part of the *knowledge cycle*, a process in which knowledge is developed and shared not only within and between client and consultant organizations but also within the wider net of social interactions. Table 4 notes the five streams in the knowledge cycle. We find in our analyzed sample that in streams of knowledge development and translation / transfer, authors pay less attention to how knowledge is constructed and shared *across* organizations, obtained from external sources (e.g., communities of practice) (see exceptions Reihlen and Nikolova 2010) or developed through client-consultant interactions before and during projects (see exception Bettencourt et al. 2002). In contrast with studies discussing boundaries between consultant and client firms (Mohe and Seidl 2011; Sturdy, Clark, et al. 2009), a small stream of articles argue that while working on consulting projects, consultants occupy a 'liminal' or transitory space (Czarniawska and Mazza 2003; Sturdy et al. 2006), which is a finding that should have an impact on knowledge practices and that is worth further enquiry. It is also striking that the literature investigates knowledge and knowing at one point in time during a particular aspect of the knowledge cycle and does not consider the consulting process as a whole from knowledge construction to translation.

Insert Table 4 about here

Individual and organizational identity. The consulting literature focuses mainly on individual identity, which is theorized as a subjective social identity ('being a consultant') constructed through discourse either by the individual (Whittle 2005; Wright et al. 2012) or through the control of the organization (Alvesson 2001; Robertson and Swan 2003). This dichotomy of the individual (agency) and the organization (structure) reflects a social constructivist versus poststructuralist thought that drives this stream of literature. It is only very recently that a synthesis of these two perspectives became the subject of research interest (Brannan et al. 2015; Costas and Kärreman 2016). Another stream that focuses on organizational identity is preoccupied with the enactment and content of the identity of consultancy firms (Furusten 2009). The interplay between individual and organizational identity is assumed to be unproblematic (cf. Gill 2015); for example, Alvesson and Empson state as follows:

> Organizational members develop and express their self-concepts within the organization and the organization in turn is developed and expressed through its members' self-concepts (2008, p. 1).

Similar to research on knowledge, empirical investigations into interorganizational identity dynamics in the consulting context remain rare. There is scope to explore how both organizational and individual identities affect the relationship between clients and consultants. Considering clients' individual identity would also bring us closer to a more comprehensive understanding of this interaction.

Insert Table 5 about here

Locus of power. Typically, and mainly as a result of Nikolova's work on client projects (Nikolova and Devinney 2012; Nikolova et al. 2009; Reihlen and Nikolova 2010), power in the literature has been conceptualized as resource-based conflicts (O'Mahoney and Sturdy 2016) between clients and consultants. Early practitioner conceptualizations of the field emphasize the powerful consultant, highlighting the vulnerability of the client when purchasing expert service (Fincham 1999). This vulnerability is based on the assumption that the consultant is the sole bearer of knowledge and hence clients are not able to judge the value of the service consultants provide. Accordingly, later studies also highlight consultant practices that result in increased client dependence (Bidwell 2010) and analyze the influence consultancy firms have over politics and business (Suddaby and Greenwood 2001). However, other studies present a very different perspective, focusing on the increasingly powerful and ever more sophisticated client (Malhotra and Morris 2009; Sturdy 1997) with a background in consulting and the expert use of procurement practices to manage these relationships (for a thorough review of client authority, see Armbrüster 2006c). These arguments have led to the acknowledgement of an interdependent relationship between clients and consultants (Glückler and Armbrüster 2003; Levina and Orlikowski 2009).

In contrast with this one-dimensional view, our analysis allows for a wider discussion of the different forms of power in the consulting literature. We find that the research on power in consulting is predominantly concerned with the locus of power determined by the varying ontology and epistemology of social constructivist and poststructuralist perspectives. While one stream emphasizes the agency of actors in the face of organizational control (Bergström 2006; Meriläinen et al. 2004) and their specific skills and position as a source of power (Bloomfield and Danieli 1995; Meriläinen et al. 2015), the other two streams focus on structural factors, such as discourse or top management, that have power over the individual. Powerful discourses influence both management and consultants (Costas et al. 2016; Levina and Orlikowski 2009), but ultimately power resides with the organization (Alvesson and Robertson 2006; Bergström et al. 2009) and in the political environment (Fincham 1999; Reihlen and Nikolova 2010) exerting control over the individual. Persuasion tactics used by consultants to market their services brings together the individual level with the power of discourse perspective (Nikolova et al. 2009). The conceptualization of this theme in our sample remains static without considering the changing power dynamics and the macro perspectives of power, such as power in the profession itself or power relations between organizations.

Insert Table 6 about here

Theorizing interactions between knowledge, identity, and power

Having reviewed the literature along the core themes of knowledge, identity, and power, we now extend our review by examining how the interfaces between these themes are conceptualized in the literature. Our thematic inductive analysis allows us to move beyond paradigmatic differences by revealing interactions between the three conceptual themes. In so doing, we can identify and amplify connections that are present in the literature of consulting that mainly due to the adoption of distinct paradigmatic perspectives have not necessarily been theorized explicitly and systematically. We map the identified interactions into an organizing framework presented in Figure 2. In the following, we discuss each interface and conclude each subsection with problematizing the research that we unpack more fully in the discussion section.

Insert Figure 2 about here

Knowledge – power interface

The examined literature theorizes the interface between knowledge and power as power being a condition for knowledge development and sharing. One aspect of this interaction is how new knowledge and new service lines are created within consultancy firms, a puzzle that is often viewed through the lens of jurisdictional conflicts as theorized by the professions literature (Abbott 1988). Anand and his colleagues argue as follows:

> The paramount role of politics in successful new practice area emergence is clear in our analysis of turf issues. Practices exist in environments in which expertise-based jurisdictional rights may be subject to challenge from competing groups (Abbott, 1988; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2011). (2007, p. 425)

In this argument, knowledge is developed through an inherent competition between communities of practice, in which the community with expertise, external ties, and internal coalitions will be in a powerful position to establish new practice areas. While this conflict between communities is ongoing, top management needs to have overall control over new concept development and over what knowledge is created to ensure that the ‘wheel is not invented and reinvented’ (Heusinkveld and Benders 2005, p. 111). For example, this can be achieved by directly controlling the processes of internal knowledge management (Fosstenløkken et al. 2003) or indirectly through cultural control (Hargadon 1998) and organizational hierarchy (Valentine 2018).

The literature is also preoccupied with how power influences the diffusion of new management concepts. The discussion of power is more nuanced here. The investigations move beyond the dispositional, resource-based view of power, such as that reflected in the management fads and fashion diffusion literature that is interested in powerful forces that create demand and ensure dissemination (Abrahamson 1996), to analyze processual manipulation in knowledge flows (O’Mahoney and Sturdy 2016). Manipulation is assumed to take place through physical boundaries by determining *who* can participate in knowledge creation (Sturdy, Clark, et al. 2009; Waisberg and Nelson 2018) or through translation by determining *what* the knowledge ‘should be’ (Brès and Gond 2014). It is through this processual sense of power that consultants, by using rhetoric and persuasion tactics, can ‘devalue’ and influence the acquisition of client knowledge (Fincham 2002, p. 78), while intermediaries, such as procurement teams, control consulting knowledge through ‘discursive boundary objects’ (O’Mahoney et al. 2013, p. 229).

Another aspect discussed in the literature is how knowledge shapes power dynamics between individuals. In its most functional way, consultants’ knowledge defines their position and status in the internal hierarchy (Kärreman and Alvesson 2009). Knowledge is theorized as an asset (Empson 2001b), where ‘power is accrued to individual members through (a) their individual creative achievement and expertise’ (Robertson and Swan 1998, p. 547), (b) their skill to combine and reuse certain knowledge (scientific, commercial, sectoral) (Robertson and Swan

2003; Waisberg and Nelson 2018), and (c) their competence to sell that knowledge (rain-making skills) (Ram 1999). Knowledge, as a result, can empower consultants and make clients dependent (Fincham 1999; McGivern et al. 2018). Conversely, codification of knowledge decreases the status and power of consultants (Malhotra and Morris 2009; Morris 2001). If we move away from the 'knowledge as an asset' perspective and look at studies that define knowledge as a process, power surfaces differently. Ambiguity in knowing is argued to create room for power (Thomas 2003), which is at the core of the uncertainty research stream in the consulting literature (Fincham et al. 2013). Levina and Orlikowski provide a more nuanced analysis of the often implicit internal power dynamics by showing that power relations within and across consulting organizations can be shifted by 'marginalized agents' deploying their prior knowledge and experience of alternative discursive resources' (2009, p. 700). More hidden ways of influencing in societal power dynamics is drawn out in Meriläinen and her colleagues' work; for example, the authors theorize expertise as an 'embodied and sensory form of knowing' and state that 'power operates through different forms of knowing and contributes to the dominance of a particular type of white man in executive management' (2015, p. 18). In addition to internal power structures and hierarchies, through creating legitimacy, consultants' knowledge can also contribute to overcoming political obstacles at client firms. Consultants provide tools for client managers to exercise control and achieve collective change in their organizations (Berglund and Werr 2000; McGivern et al. 2018; Sturdy 1997), while at the same time, consultants use the rhetoric of technical rationality to appear politically neutral (Armbrüster 2004).

Whether or not one adopts a Foucauldian lens, shedding light on the interactions of knowledge and power in the sampled literature reveals the logic and inevitability of these relationships. Many authors who explore this interaction indeed adopt alternative paradigms. We refer to these studies as assuming an *influencing* interaction, which means that the presence of one theme has an either positive or negative impact on the other; thus, power influences knowledge development, sharing, and diffusion, and knowledge affects power dynamics. By problematizing the current theorization of this influencing interaction in the literature, in our sample, we identify an absence of client organizations in general and a lack of consideration of the influence that power might have over knowledge *across* client and consultant organizations and especially in particular streams of the knowledge cycle, such as codification and selling.

Knowledge – identity interface

Our analysis shows that the interface between knowledge and identity is mostly theorized as knowledge being a resource for consultants' identity construction, having expertise that helps to build or threaten the identity of individuals and organizations. At an individual level, the examined articles emphasize that 'consultants define themselves through the knowledge they generate' (Robertson et al. 2003, p. 852). Depending on their type of competence (Morris 2001), it is through this that they enact their professional/occupational roles (Fincham 2002; Harvey et al. 2017). Achieved through learning, the changing nature of identities is also demonstrated in the literature (Ibarra 2000). A more nuanced analysis explores in detail the nature of knowledge that consultants draw on (fact-based, experience-based, dispositional) and links dispositional knowledge with identity (Løwendahl et al. 2001). Alvesson theorizes knowledge as a resource for identity from a critical poststructuralist perspective that sees knowledge as a rhetorical strategy:

> Knowledge, i.e., claims of knowledge in social contexts, plays various roles, such as being: (a) a means for creating community and social identity through offering organizational members a shared language and a common way of relation to themselves and their world; (b)… […] In all these roles, knowledge may be seen as helpful in the construction of the identity of knowledge workers. Knowledge claims can thus also be seen as identity work. (2001, p. 882)

Articles are preoccupied with how an expert identity is enacted (Costas et al. 2016) and legitimated externally in the interaction with clients through discursive and symbolic resources

(Bloomfield and Danieli 1995, p. 36). In the dynamics of client-consultant relationship, knowledge is not always enabling, as consultants' expertise may pose a threat to clients' managerial identity of 'being competent and 'in control'' (Sturdy 1997, p. 403) and threaten consultants' professional identity if knowledge is codified (Morris 2001). At an organizational level, the identity of the consultancies is grounded in their shared knowledge base (Empson 2001a; Harvey et al. 2017), recruited employees' superior expertise (Alvesson and Robertson 2006), and the form and content of organizational knowledge in general (Alvesson and Empson 2008).

Various theorizations in the literature show that identity also has a role to play in the knowledge cycle, particularly in knowledge development. Knowledge-sharing is 'highly contingent upon how consultants define themselves' (Alvesson and Robertson 2006, p. 214), and knowledge creation is influenced by the coupling of an elite organizational identity and a strong professional individual identity (Robertson et al. 2003, p. 851).

In highlighting the role expertise plays in the consultants' professional identities, our analysis of the identity-knowledge interface parallels the argument on the centrality of knowledge as a distinguishing characteristic of professions (Abbott 1988). We label this interface as *resourcing* interaction in a sense that one theme is a resource for the other; thus, knowledge is a resource for identity, as consultants and consulting firms define themselves based on their knowledge and identity is a resource for knowledge development. An investigation of this interface unearths aspects on how consultants' identity work impacts the knowledge cycle, for instance in the translation or diffusion of management concepts (Handley et al. 2007). Focusing on how identity evolves could help further problematize the relationship between clients and consultants.

Identity – power interface

Most of the examined literature that considers the relationship between identity and power is preoccupied with how 'identity is central in forms of control' in corporate culture (Alvesson 2001, p. 877). For instance, Bloomfield and Danieli demonstrate that 'discursively constituted identities – whether these refer to consultants, clients or particular information systems – are not fixed but must be constantly reinforced'; hence 'consultancy practice necessarily entails the exercise of power, in the endeavor to construct others' identities and interests' (1995, p. 40). Identities, however, may not only be controlled by discourses (Costas and Kärreman 2013; Whittle 2005). Management processes (e.g., performance systems, recruitment) (Bergström et al. 2009; Kärreman and Alvesson 2004) and modes of organizing (e.g., informal performance-based meritocracy vs. structured partner system) (Robertson and Swan 1998) also serve as controls by regulating or creating an enabling environment for particular identities. Robertson and Swan's study demonstrates an enabling environment as follows:

> A way of operating served to protect and manage the egos of these individuals who could continue to retain high degrees of autonomy and perceive themselves under such a regime as 'scientists' rather than as 'consultants'. (1998, p. 553)

Recently, there has been an increased interest in how consultants respond to managerial control, and studies have been conducted dissecting tensions and resistance in identity regulation. These studies demonstrate that management control results in a conflict between multiple identities: the identity that is expected and the one that is experienced. The conflict remains either unresolved, placing consultants in an acutely anxious state (Gill 2015), or it is successfully managed by consultants through coping practices (Reid 2015; Visscher et al. 2018). Although they do not change the status quo and even reinforce power structures, consultants have the agency to resist dominant discourses and subtle forms of control (Meriläinen et al. 2004; Wright et al. 2012) through the use of cynicism (Whittle 2005) and escapism (Brannan et al. 2015).

The literature does not only investigate controlled identities but theorizes identity as a form of control itself. Power in this substream of research stems from organizational elite identities that are developed by senior management to achieve normative control (Robertson and Swan 2003) and a ‘secure base for compliance’ (Alvesson and Robertson 2006, p. 213) in consulting firms. Individual identities may also serve as forms of power, such as egopower (Robertson and Swan 1998) and political identities (Wright et al. 2012). Identities and identity work are political in that ‘they influence local discourses and encourage others to change as well’ (Wright et al. 2012, p. 1453). For instance, in the case of CSR managers, ‘their identities were linked to the political activity of spreading knowledge about climate change and influencing others’ (Wright et al. 2012, p. 1471).

In this third interface, we label the relationship between identity and power a *controlling* interaction. This means that identity is either a form of control (power *of*) or that identity itself is controlled by discourses and management processes (power *over*). This substream of research is dominated by arguments that stem from Foucault’s ‘subjectification’ thesis, dominant in his earlier works (Lukes 2005). According to this thesis, individuals are passive subjects to power through their participation in discursive and disciplinary practices that shape their own meaning or self-identity (Foucault 1980, 1982). Subjectification has had great impact on MOS in general (Fleming and Spicer 2014) and on the consulting literature in particular, which has resulted in less focus on the agency of individuals within this particular identity-power interface. Consulting studies of management control also build on Foucault’s notion of disciplinary power (Foucault 1975), which ‘is realized by way of technologies of surveillance, rendering the employee an object to be known and calculated, which enables management to distribute punishments and rewards’ (Bergström et al. 2009, p. 178). While research is vast on controlling individual identities, power over organizational identities as well as possible interactions across organizations and within client organizations are overlooked.

Interfaces of knowledge, identity, and power: Towards an integrative framework

Even though knowledge, identity and power are at the core of consulting research, we find that empirical analysis rarely considers the interface of all three conceptual themes. We have identified fourteen articles in the literature that do so. None explicitly set out to analyze the intersection of the three themes, and often one of the themes is more dominant than the other. However, these articles provide a more comprehensive view of practice and actors of consulting.

One of the interactions posits identity as a form of control that influences knowledge practices. Robertson and Swan (1998), for example, discuss 'ego power', power that stems from expertise and the confidence to persuade clients and peers about one's own ability and expertise. In their article, they address and analyze the interface of the three themes explicitly, but their focus is narrower than the conceptualization we advocate. Nevertheless, they point out novel interactions between the themes in the literature. For example, they argue that the ability to persuade clients of one's expertise can be a source of power within a consultancy firm. This echoes the argument of critical studies on impression management (Berglund and Werr 2000; Clark 1995; Clark and Salaman 1996). However, attention to power in this interplay allows these scholars to discover a latent hierarchy based on expert identity and that not only has substantial impact on this interplay but also acts as a form of informal control. The literature also highlights that consultants themselves need to be persuaded through more subtle forms of organizational control (Costas et al. 2016, p. 11) about their own ability to ensure that they 'realize the full fruits of their own expertise and ingenuity for the purposes of the organization' (Sewell 2005, p. 687).

Expertise as a source of identity that is controlled through discourse or empowered to resist this control is another way to bring the three themes together in empirical analysis. For example, in Bloomfield and Danieli's paper, the authors show through a National Health Service case study how management consultants construct themselves as ‘obligatory passage points’ between the management concept and the client, using sociopolitical skills in the process and promoting an expert identity (1995). It is an actor-network theory viewpoint that leads authors to question the image of the powerful consultant, to identify that power is inherent in the practice of consulting, and suggest it has a controlling effect on both clients and consultants. ‘Identity regulation […] is a pervasive form of organizational control in knowledge work arrangements’ argues Costas and Kärreman in their research on boredom (Costas and Kärreman 2016, p. 62). They demonstrate how a learning and expert discourse constructs consultant identities. These individuals with experts identities may also draw on discourses to resist others within the organization (Meriläinen et al. 2004), and they circumvent resistance by drawing on various contradictory discourses in the construction of their identities (Kärreman and Alvesson 2009) and by adapting their roles and identities (Harvey et al. 2017). O’Mahoney and colleagues (2013) suggest that these expert identities may be threatened by intermediaries (i.e., procurement) and new functions that control management knowledge through boundary objects (i.e., proposals).

Consulting research on identity regulation (see also Empson, 2004) not only highlights the expert discourse that consultants draw on to construct their identities but also the knowledge that is gained from such regulation. For example, monitoring consultant identities provides knowledge to management that facilitates the control of these identities through punishment and reward. Bergström and his colleagues analyze performance appraisals as a tool for power over employees in a consultancy firm (Bergström et al. 2009). Querying the role of identity and knowledge in their analysis allows them to obtain a richer understanding of their main focus, namely, disciplinary power, and thus they identify a new, more subtle form of governance and control.

Somewhat different theorizations of this interface stem from the Foucauldian tradition that argues that subjectivity is an outcome of power/knowledge discourses (Foucault 1975, 2002). For example, through discourse analysis, Cullen studies a management guru book (Steven Covey's 7 habits) that later led to the author establishing a successful consulting business. He demonstrates that the self-classifications advocated by the book do not provide new knowledge about the reader but constructs the subject itself. In search of a new effective self, the readers follow the book's advice and subscribe to constant self-examination (surveillance) that as a result constitutes them as both effects and objects of power and knowledge. He concludes that this management method of self-measurement creates a self through a power/knowledge structure (Cullen 2009).

Another example for this Foucauldian approach is Bergström's (2006) study, in which he analyzes the recruitment process of large US consultancies operating in Sweden and finds that job applicants are subjected to discourses during recruitment interviews only as much as they accept and identify with these discourses. He showed that 'subjectivity is a complex outcome of the co-related practices of self-managed agency and discourses of power/knowledge' (Bergström 2006, p. 372), which in itself critiques the Foucauldian power/knowledge argument by emphasizing the agency of the actors.

A most recent article by Bourgoin and Harvey (2018) illustrates well the potential in investigating the three themes together. While the focus of their paper is addressing the puzzle of how consultants at the same time learn and maintain credibility, the authors' thorough analysis based on Goffman's face theory uncovers a number of dynamics at play: clients threaten consultants' identity and hence knowledge flow in the relationship; this in effect influences how knowledge is used by consultants, while using their power to create competence to safeguard their identity.

Discussion and conclusions

Through our review, we identified and mobilized three core themes of knowledge, identity, and power, and based on a thorough analysis of 113 consulting articles, we induced an 'Influencing-Resourcing-Controlling' (IRC) framework that specifies the interfaces of these themes to problematize the literature. We now discuss the implications of our metaparadigm review and propose new research perspectives.

Opening-up multiple research perspectives

We acknowledge that the conceptualization of themes and their interactions suggest a particular paradigmatic stance and that these views are not readily rendered commensurate with one another. However, following Gioia and Pitre (1990), we argue for meta-triangulation across perspectives, a metaparadigmatic approach that allows us to consider 'inherently irreconcilable' (p. 584) paradigms together as a 'multidimensional representation' (p. 596) of a phenomenon, with the goal to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of phenomena (see also Lewis and Grimes 1999). We therefore consider the conceptualization of all three core themes (knowledge, identity, and power) and their interfaces. In so doing, we move away from the 'functionalist – critical' dualism (Cerruti et al. 2019) towards understanding new, more complex ways of organizing in the current capitalist context (Sturdy et al. 2015; Werr and Styhre 2002).

Metaparadigmatic considerations of our research reveal problematic areas in the literature. The first reflects the way themes are defined. For instance, both identity and power are researched as fixed, a constraint that hinders the processual perspective on how the identities of consulting organizations and consultants change (see Ibarra 1999 for a notable exception) and what implications this may have on the 'controlling' interface. For example, it seems obvious that a junior consultant will have a different form of control than will a partner and will be involved in different power dynamics with a client based on the junior consultant's 'kinds of knowledge' (Waisberg and Nelson 2018, p. 446), but we do not know how this transition and the corresponding change in identity actually takes place.

Despite repeated calls and a special issue in the *Scandinavian Journal of Management* in 2009 (Nikolova et al. 2009; Sturdy 2012), research on clients and the client-consultant relationship in action was underrepresented in our sample. Our analysis shows that this has implications for the theorization of identity and the 'influencing' interface between knowledge and power, as clients have a crucial role in the construction of consultant identities (Bourgoin and Harvey 2018). The client is not a homogeneous entity (Czarniawska and Mazza 2003), so we need to consider how consulting projects contribute to the construction of *their* varying identities. Once we address how these identities are formed, we can take a step further and investigate how they together with consultant identities affect the client-consultant relationship during a project, eventually having an impact on the success of these interactions. Not only are identities constituted in this interaction: knowledge practices involved in this process are also subjected to power dynamics. In the 'influencing interface', knowledge practices (e.g., knowledge exchange) are not only complex and problematic but also never power neutral, which is a perspective that should also be useful to consider in client-consultant interactions in the consulting literature. These assumptions have implications beyond consulting, requiring us to reconsider relationships in other professional service firms characterized by professional-client interactions (e.g., law firms).

We argue that explicit empirical investigation of the interface of knowledge, identity, and power within one research project is an important exercise in the literature. As the perspective on consulting has shifted from a one-sided, static entity to a more relational, interactive, coproduction process (Sturdy, Werr, et al. 2009), it has brought with it a more complex view of the dynamics within the field. We suggest that instead of turning away from this complexity, we should embrace it (Tsoukas 2017). Like a kaleidoscope, our framework provides a heuristic tool to appreciate the complex and multifaceted nature of management consulting. First, the framework can be used to review whether an alternative definition or operationalization of knowledge, identity and power anchored in a given paradigm could be used when studying a specific consultancy-related phenomenon (see Tables, 4, 5 and 6). In this regard, our analysis can help researchers combine insights from multiple paradigmatic orientations and support the development of metaparadigmatic research processes (see Lewis & Grimes, 1999: 673-676). Second, whatever the focus of the consultancy study is, our framework offers a lens to investigate whether and how knowledge, identity or power dynamics operate and interact in the phenomenon of interest (see Figure 2).

Prior reviews called for an increased focus on the changing practice of consultants, new developments in the industry, and criticized the literature for being removed from practitioner concerns and neglecting research around certain consulting activities (O'Mahoney et al. 2008; Sturdy 2012). Using our framework (Figure 2) to explore emerging or neglected consulting activities (e.g., multiparty projects) should bring fruitful results to this endeavor. For instance, our IRC framework could help understand the complex identity-power-knowledge dynamics that are at play when new, ill-defined domains, such as business ethics (Ben Khaled and Gond 2019), corporate social responsibility (Gond and Brès 2019), and sustainability (Hahn et al. 2017), become subjected to consultancy activities. Within such domains, fragile and fragmented knowledge bases are co-constructed together with new individual and organizational identities in ways that can threaten the power of established professionals on the consultant as well as on the client side (Bourgoin and Harvey 2018; Brès et al. 2019).

Contributions and implications

Our analysis contributes to theory in three ways. First, our review advances the management consultancy field, notably by providing evidence of its increasing presence in generalist top management journals and by offering an up-to-date, consolidated systematic review of a large sample of the literature. In contrast with insights from previous reviews (e.g., Mohe et al. 2011), our analysis reveals that the literature is still spread across disciplines and outlets and cannot be described as ‘atheoretical’ anymore. We found that research led by theory has increased substantially since 2000 and that sociological perspectives now dominate the conceptualizations of the field over that of other disciplines (Faust, 2012). As studies have become more densely theorized, the literature has moved away from pragmatic managerial insights, giving rise to criticism from scholars of the consulting field (Hicks et al. 2009; O’Mahoney et al. 2008; Sturdy 2012). Although empirical research has increased, the literature is still dominated by qualitative papers based mostly on interviews, ensuring empirical depth. While Sturdy (2012) projects that the field might move towards more functionalist empirical accounts (large-scale surveys and cross-cultural comparisons), we propose that as we start to understand consulting as being more complex and situational, these studies are unlikely to dominate any time soon.

Second, our review provides a metaparadigmatic lens to view the consulting literature. Through this lens, we look across research paradigms to identify points of commonalities in the examined literature and investigate how three core themes and their interfaces have been theorized to date. The ‘IRC framework’ we induce spans across paradigms and allows us to construct a unique map of the field. This map can help: reviewing which conceptualizations of knowledge, identity and power are available to investigate a given consultancy-related phenomenon; making connections between core themes of the field by showing how a given concept (e.g., power) relate to others (e.g., identity or knowledge); and identifying how processes of influencing, resourcing and controlling can help dynamically conceptualize the relationships between these concepts. This new map, however, might not be unique to consulting. Certain cross-occupational knowledge-intensive contexts could also benefit from mobilizing the IRC framework, especially in the case of other professional services firms (e.g., law and accounting firms, health institutions, and academia). Similarly, this pattern could be found in organizational and field-level processes. For example, when studying the construction of new occupational mandates, knowledge, in the form of expertise or skills, represents a key theme in the process of establishing legitimacy. Therefore, to improve our understanding of the role of knowledge in this process, it is necessary to consider both power and identity. This problematization process helps to make sense of these practices in a distinctive way. In this example then, the intention is not simply to investigate the three themes together but to uncover their interactions. We suggest that it is not enough to examine how occupations or professions have historically drawn boundaries around their peculiar identity and form of knowledge while exercising their power in the institutional environment. Analysis needs to specify the processes that bridge the three themes: how knowledge is influencing/influenced by power; how identity is a resource of/for knowledge; and how identity controls/is controlled through these interactions.

Third and finally, our analysis sheds a different light on the consultancy literature to create bridges across distinct paradigmatic approaches, to instigate dialogue in the literature. By this, we answer the call for scholars of the professions to consolidate, extend, and differentiate the field (Empson et al. 2015). Various authors argue for the integration of perspectives on consulting in the literature and maintain that these are not mutually exclusive (Faust 2012; Hicks et al. 2009), and only a few reject paradigm incommensurability (Armbrüster 2006b; Sturdy 2004). Others note the shortcomings of these views and reason that scholarship should overcome these limitations by moving away from the 'functionalist – critical' dualism (Sturdy et al. 2015; Werr and Styhre 2002) and 'relaxing the critical stance towards consultants' (Bourgoin and Harvey

2018, p. 1633). Our review can help develop a dialogue in the consulting literature about a given theme (e.g., identity, power) by accounting for the multiple theoretical approaches to it that have been used to date or reflecting on the balance of these three themes in specific frameworks, such as situated learning (e.g., Handley et al. 2007; Hicks et al. 2009). More interestingly, by making explicit the relationship between conceptual themes across paradigms, the IRC framework can be used as a map for future consulting research both within and across organizations. Aiding empirical investigations of the phenomenon, it identifies in detail levels of analysis, stakeholders involved, and their various theorizations.

Limitations and future research

The requirement to establish boundaries for our review inevitably resulted in us making certain choices about what to exclude. We acknowledge that reviewing literature through a systematic review technique is inherently reductionist, as, for instance, this approach excludes books, and may thus underrepresent historical studies that are often published as monographs. In addition, the unique combination of SLR technique and thematic inductive analysis we developed generated specific methodological challenges and created important coding requirements. We made the decision to limit our scope to generalist journals for the line-by-line inductive analysis of each article, which enabled us to explore the theme in further depth, while limiting the breadth of the second part of the study.

However, combining systematic reviewing with inductive thematic coding allowed us to make stronger claims (each link between themes can be traced backed to any of the coded papers) on a smaller part of the consulting literature (only 113 articles were coded inductively). Nevertheless, we think our review offers a template for scholars on how to review meaningfully and systematically a literature that is both quantitative and qualitative. Our framework, by making explicit the dynamic relationship between the core concepts under study in this literature, can be used for analyzing other fields of research and could support future empirical inquiries.

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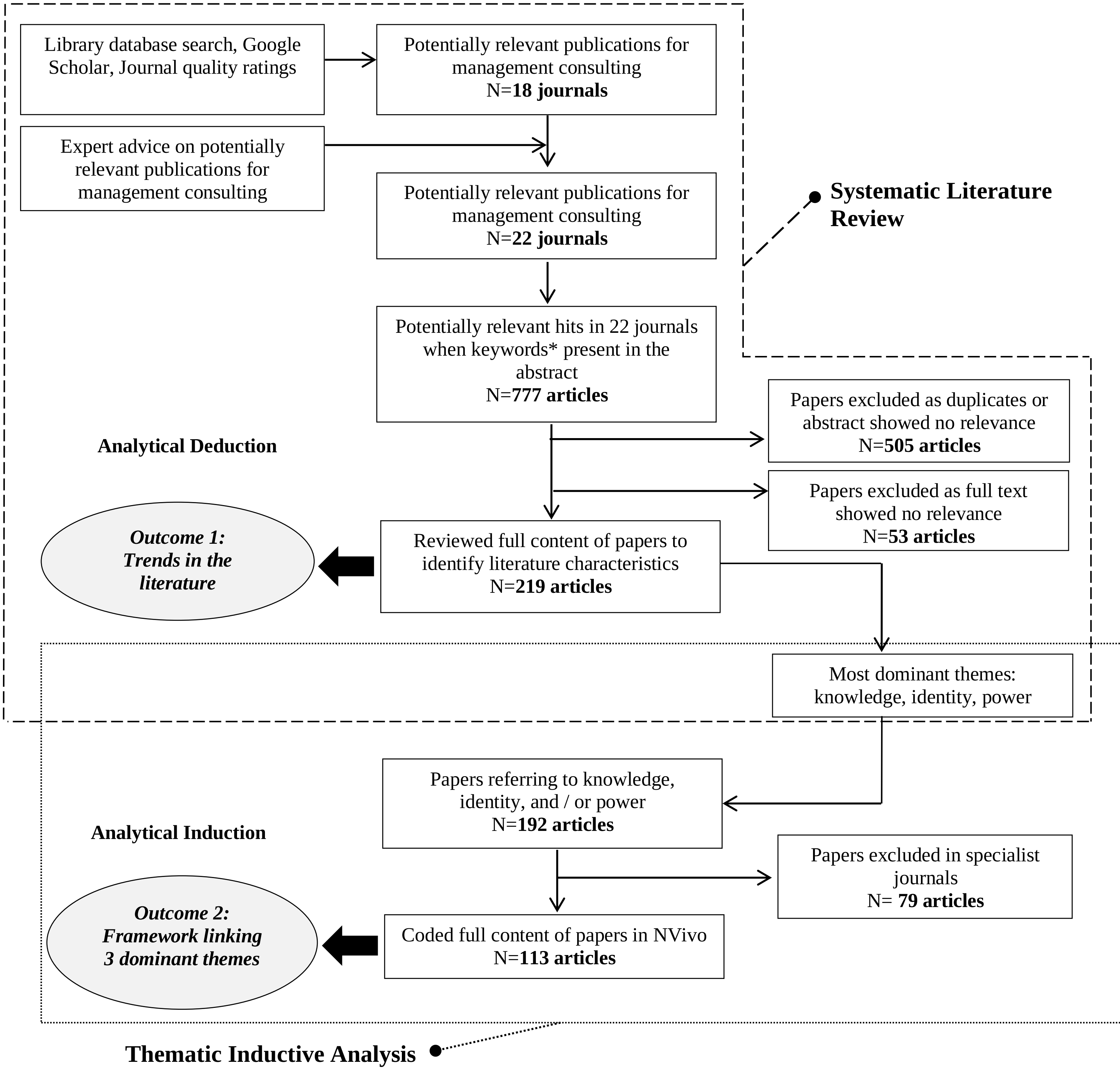
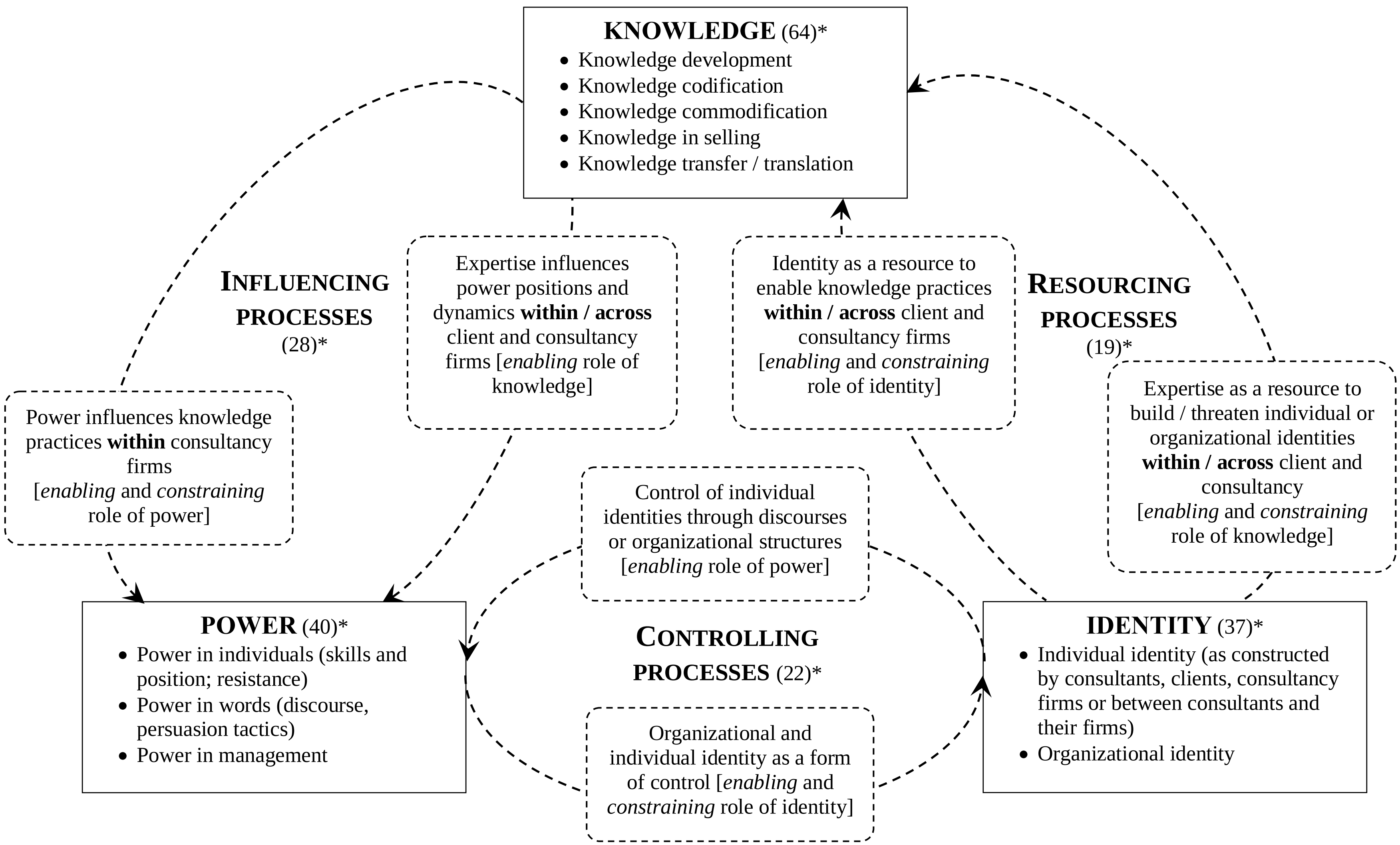
** Please note that we did not include all the references from the reviewed literature. This information is available as a separate file in Appendix 2.*

FIGURE 1
Summary of paper selection and analysis process



* *Keywords including 'consulting', 'consultant', 'consultancy', and 'consultancies' were connected with Boolean algebra logical operator 'or' and were searched for within the abstract of the articles of the 22 journals between the period of 1 January 1990 and 31 December 2018.*

FIGURE 2
An 'Influencing-Resourcing-Controlling' (IRC) Framework for Studying the Interface of Knowledge, Identity, and Power in Management Consulting



*Figures denote the total number of articles, in which a theme or process have been mentioned.

TABLE 1
Summary of previous reviews of the management consulting literature

	Source	Type of review	Purpose of review	Basis of categorization	Key themes	Main findings	Future research agenda
Armenakis & Burdg 1988	Journal of Management	Structured and systematic	Review literature to facilitate further empirical research and understanding and practice of consulting	Scientific rigor and phases of consultation	Along pre-identified consultation phases	Majority of literature is experience-based	Increase scientifically rigorous research in: organizational politics, consulting success, consultation phases and strategies, ethical conduct
Fincham & Clark 2002a	Edited book	Unstructured and narrative	Provide an introduction to the book on critical perspectives in consulting	Theoretical perspectives (OD & critical)	Rhetoric and consultant-client relationship	Theoretical perspectives differ in: independence of researchers, focus, status of consultant knowledge, studying consultants in their own right	Not provided
Engwall & Kipping 2002	Edited book	Unstructured and narrative	Provide an introduction to the book and a framework for analyzing emergence and dynamics of consulting	Theoretical perspectives (OD, critical, knowledge diffusion) and level of analysis (industry, firm, project)	Rhetoric, legitimizing role of consultants, management fashions and diffusion of knowledge, history of the industry	Limited empirical work in the literature Need to combine studies at different levels of analysis	Further research on consultants as carriers of management knowledge, and non-Anglo-American history of the industry
Fincham & Clark 2002b	International Studies of Management and Organization	Unstructured and narrative	Provide an overview of the literature for ISMO special issue on management consultancy	Theoretical perspectives (OD & critical)	Status of consultants, management fashions, professionalism	Theoretical perspectives differ in: independence of researchers, focus, status of consultant knowledge, studying consultants in their own right	As set out by the articles: industry development, client-consultant relations, consultant knowledge, power dynamics, innovation, management ideas
Armbrüster 2006	Book	Unstructured and narrative	Provide an overview of economic and sociological	Theoretical perspectives (functionalist &	Knowledge transfer features of consulting firms,	Literature systematically draws on sociological	Suggests other theories (game theory, economic

			perspectives on consulting through the lens of four theories	critical)	knowledge management, management fashions, socio-political and communicative skills, problematic nature of knowledge	neoinstitutionalism, but not other theories. Difference between perspectives: - View on knowledge - Economic role of consultants - Agency of the client - Attitude towards consultants	certification) as additional perspectives to look at the phenomenon of consulting
O'Mahoney, Adams, Neely & Antonacopoulou 2008	Research Project	Structured and systematic	Identify practitioner priorities and examine extent to which academic research address these themes	Key practitioner concerns: strategic change, operations and innovation management, procurement, people management, and professionalization	Typical questions around: consulting identities, diffusion of management ideas, structures affecting consultant action, institutions affecting industries, rational choice economics explaining consulting strategies	Many practitioner concerns are addressed in literature, but need more in-depth exploration	Suggest engaging with practitioners in identifying mutually beneficial research topics and moving from descriptive towards more normative queries
Sturdy, Handley, Clark & Fincham 2009	Book	Unstructured and narrative	Provide introduction and set the scene for the book on boundaries and knowledge flow in consulting	Theoretical perspectives	Management fashions, knowledge transfer or flow, rhetoric	Both functionalist and critical perspectives view consultants as expert outsiders. Emerging research show their liminal positions and increasing sophistication of clients	Not provided
Mohe, Sieweke & Birkner 2011	Research Project	Structured and systematic	Review between 1990 and 2008 to delineate the literature and show key trends	n/a	Industry turnover significantly influenced the quantity of academic research.	Historical and geographical development of the industry, factors of success, functions of	n/a

					Dominance of European authors and qualitative approaches. Could not identify predominant theories, but mostly cited are institutional and embeddedness theory.	consultants, HRM, and education of consultants	
Kipping & Clark 2012	Edited book	Unstructured and narrative	Provide an introduction to the Handbook of Management Consulting	Temporal	History, disciplinary approaches Issues: knowledge management, management fashion, client-consultant relationship	Literature has not become mainstream (lack of quantitative research and grand theory) Disciplinarily diverse literature	As set out by the articles in the book: ethics, gender, and post-colonial perspective
Sturdy 2012	Edited book	Unstructured and narrative	Identify new developments and gaps to draw up suggestions for future research	n/a	Refer to O'Mahoney et al. 2007	Research is empirically led and/or reflect wider theoretical debates Lack of empirical depth due to inaccessibility and secrecy Main theoretical perspectives: institutional theory, transaction-cost economics, psychodynamics, and social constructionism	1. Core consulting activities and dynamics 2. Emerging consulting activities (e.g. offshoring, multi-party projects) 3. Discourse analysis, observation, cross-cultural, large-scale surveys 4. Practitioner concerns: accountability, diversity and exclusion
Fincham, Mohe & Seidl 2013	International Studies of Management and Organization	Unstructured and narrative	Provide an introduction to the ISMO special issue on uncertainty and take stock of what is	n/a	Client, network analysis, systems theory, economic and postmodern approaches	Uncertainty has been a key research issue	Focus on four dimensions of uncertainty: - Sources - Modes of coping

			known about the link between uncertainty and consulting				**-** Subject of uncertainty **-** Contextual factors
Cerruti, Tavoletti & Grieco 2019	Management Research Review	Structured and systematic	Review between 1971 and 2017 to systematize existing knowledge and be equipped for digital transformation	Theoretical perspectives (functionalist / critical) & research streams	Drivers for success, role of consultants, client-consultant relationship	Divide between functionalist & critical view of consulting (bright/dark side)	Focus on emerging markets, SMEs, public administration, and skills of consultants in the digital age

TABLE 2
Distribution of Articles over Journals, 1990-2018

Journal	Number of articles	Empirical articles	Conceptual articles	Total proportion
General management				
Academy of Management Journal	6	6	-	2.7%
Academy of Management Review	1	-	1	0.5%
Administrative Science Quarterly	1	1	-	0.5%
British Journal of Management	5	3	2	2.3%
Journal of Management	1	1	-	0.5%
Journal of Management Studies	15	12	3	6.8%
International Journal of Management Reviews	-	-	-	-
Journal of Management Inquiry	1	-	1	0.5%
International Studies of Management & Organization	13	8	5	5.9%
Scandinavian Journal of Management	15	13	2	6.8%
Practitioner focused management				
Harvard Business Review	11*	3	8	5.0%
California Management Review	4	4	-	1.8%
MIT Sloan Management Review	-	-	-	-
Academy of Management Perspectives	1	1	-	0.5%
Organizational theory				
Human Relations	24	16	6	11.0%
Organization Studies	18	15	3	8.2%
Organization Science	9	9	-	4.1%
Organization	12	10	2	5.5%
Specialist journals				
Accounting, Organization and Society	10	9	1	4.6%
Management Learning	17	11	6	7.8%
Research Policy	10	9	1	4.6%
Journal of Organizational Change Management	45	29	16	20.5%
Total	*219*	*162*	*57*	*100%*

* *Note:* All 11 articles in Harvard Business Review were prescriptive, tailored towards practitioners. The ones that referred to underlying research were deemed empirical (3), while the remaining ones were categorized as conceptual (8).

TABLE 3
Definitions of Knowledge, Identity, and Power in the Management Consulting Literature

Conceptual theme	Definition	Description	Example articles
Knowledge	Knowledge as an asset	Functional resource that can be exchanged and aggregated	Bidwell (2010); Hargadon (1998)
	Knowing as a process	Social construct disseminated and legitimated through interaction and translated between actors	Bogenrieder & Nooteboom (2004); Werr & Stjernberg (2003)
	Knowledge as rhetorical strategy	Discursive claims embedded in power relations	Bloomfield & Danieli (1995); Heusinkveld & Benders (2012)
Identity	Identity as an asset	Static self that is the property of the individual or organization (e.g. elite, change agent)	Alvesson & Robertson (2006), Sturdy & Wright (2008)
	Identity work as a process	Social construct that evolves over time and permeated by unresolvable tensions	Bergström (2006); Ibarra (2000); Harvey et al. 2017
Power	Power as an asset (coercion)	Direct authority that stems from position and/or resources	Conyon, Peck & Sadler (2009)
	Manipulation as a process	Shaping inclusion and exclusion of issues in the agenda	Fincham (1999)
	Domination as a process	Influencing through ideology or tradition	Whittle (2005)
	Subjectification as a process	Control of identity through discourse or organizational systems	Robertson & Swan (2003)

TABLE 4

Research Focus in Articles of Knowledge in the Management Consulting Literature

Stream	Description	Example articles
Knowledge development	Practice of constructing ‘new’ individual or organizational knowledge by consultants and clients	Costas & Kärreman (2016); Empson (2001b); Fosstenløkken, Løwendahl & Revang (2003); Hargadon (1998); Løwendahl, Revang, & Fosstenlokken (2001); Meriläinen, Tienari & Valtonen (2015); Reihlen & Nikolova (2010); Robertson, Scarbrough & Swan (2003); Robertson & Swan (1998); Rogan & Mors (2017); Sarvary (1999); Shah, Cross & Levin (2018)
Knowledge codification	Practice of articulating, routinizing, and storing knowledge for sharing within the consultant firm	Bogenrieder & Nooteboom (2004); Heusinkveld, Benders & Hillebrand (2013); Kärreman & Alvesson (2009); Morris (2001); Werr & Stjernberg (2003)
Knowledge commodification	Practice of transforming consultant knowledge into marketable products	Brès & Gond (2014); Christensen et al. (2013); Fincham (1999); Heusinkveld & Benders (2005); Heusinkveld, Benders & Hillebrand (2013); Heusinkveld & Visscher (2012); O’Mahoney, Heusinkveld & Wright (2013); Prasad et al. (2009); Sturdy (2011); Suddaby & Greenwood (2001)
Knowledge in selling	Practice of sales of knowledge products	Abrahamson (1996); Armbrüster & Glückler (2007); Bloomfield & Danieli (1995); David & Strang (2006); Harvey et al. (2017); Nikolova, Möllering & Reihlen (2015); O’Mahoney, Heusinkveld & Wright (2013); Payne & Poulfelt (1994); Richter & Niewiem (2009)
Knowledge translation / transfer	Practice of some sort of knowledge exchange or flow between consultant and client	Bettencourt et al. (2002); Bourgoin & Harvey (2018); Fincham (2002); Heusinkveld & Visscher (2012); Levine & Prietula (2012); Mohe & Seidl (2011); Payne & Poulfelt (1994); Stigliani & Ravasi (2018); Sturdy, Clark, Fincham & Handley (2009); Valentine (2018); Waisberg & Nelson (2018); Werr & Stjernberg (2003)

TABLE 5
Research Focus in Articles of Identity in the Management Consulting Literature

Stream	Description	Example articles
Individual identity	Consultants constructing their own identity	Harvey et al. (2017); Hoyer & Steyaert (2015); Kitay & Wright (2007); Nikolova, Möllering & Reihlen (2015); Mühlhaus & Bouwmeester (2016); O'Mahoney, Heusinkveld & Wright (2013); Sturdy & Wright (2008); Sturdy (2011); Sturdy, Wylie & Wright (2013); Whittle (2005); Wright & Nyberg (2012)
	Consultant and client constructing client identity	Alvesson, Kärreman, Sturdy & Handley (2009); Nikolova, Möllering & Reihlen (2015); Werr & Styhre (2002)
	Consultancy firm constructing the identity of the consultant	Alvesson (2001); Kärreman & Alvesson (2004); Kärreman & Alvesson (2009); Robertson & Swan (2003)
	Both consultant and consultancy firm constructing the identity of the consultant	Bergström (2006); Bergström, Hasselbladh & Kärreman (2009); Brannan, Parsons & Priola (2015); Costas, Blagoev & Kärreman (2016); Costas & Kärreman (2013); Costas & Kärreman (2016); Gill (2015); Reid (2015); Hoyer (2016); Visscher et al. 2018
Organizational identity	Consultancy firm enacting its own identity	Alvesson & Empson (2008); Alvesson & Robertson (2006); Furusten (2009); Harvey et al. (2017); Kärreman & Rylander (2008); Robertson & Swan (2003)

TABLE 6
Research Focus in Articles of Power in the Management Consulting Literature

Stream	Description	Example articles
Power in individuals	Power lies in individual skills and position	Bloomfield & Danieli (1995); Brès & Gond (2014); Sturdy (1997); Meriläinen, Tienari & Valtonen (2015); Williams & Polman (2015)
	Power lies in the individual who resists and 'dis-identifies'	Bergström (2006); Meriläinen, Tienari, Thomas & Davies (2004); Robertson & Swan (2003); Whittle (2005)
Power in words	Power lies in discourse	Costas, Blagoev & Kärreman (2016); Costas & Kärreman (2013); Costas & Kärreman (2016); Gill (2015); Levina & Orlikowski (2009); Prasad, Prasad & Mir (2011)
	Power lies in persuasion tactics	Cullen (2009); Fincham (2002); Heusinkveld & Benders (2005); Nadler (2005); Nikolova, Reihlen & Schlapfner (2009)
Power in management	Power lies with the organization (control)	Alvesson (2001); Alvesson & Robertson (2006); Bergström, Hasselbladh & Kärreman (2009); Brannan, Parsons & Priola (2015); Costas & Kärreman (2016); Kärreman & Alvesson (2004); Reid (2015)
	Power lies within the organization (political environment)	Fincham (1999); Anand, Gardner & Morris (2007); Reihlen & Nikolova (2010)