

Grown up by now?

An Investigation of 19 Years of Consulting Research

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Abstract

Management consulting has gained increased attention in sciences in recent years. But, metaphorically spoken, the territory of management consulting research is made up of unrelated research isles. Indeed, it is based on research from various disciplines (e.g. economics, sociology, geography or history). On the one hand, this multidisciplinary and heterogeneity provide new insights into the research field. On the other hand, the same multidisciplinary and heterogeneity make it difficult – even for “consulting researchers” – to follow up the whole bandwidth of streams of discussions. In order to generate knowledge about the status quo of management consulting research, this paper aims to summarize the current state-of-the-art with regard to employed topics, theories, and methodologies. Our findings reveal a significant increase of published articles within the period of 19 years (1990-2008) where a high correlation between the turnover of consulting industry and the number of published articles is observable. Although management consulting research is still a heterogeneous field of research, specialized foci which changed over the years are evident. With respect to empirical research our analysis reveals a notable increase. Despite to this, the analysis still comes up with a predominance of atheoretical papers.

Introduction

More than 20 years have passed since Armenakis and Burdug (1988) published their literature review about the state of the art of management consulting research. Much has changed since that time – regarding the consulting industry itself as well as the research on it. While the global turnover of the management consulting industry was about 10 billion dollar at the time of Armenakis's and Burdug's review, it has experienced a tremendous economic growth since then. The market size of the global consulting industry, for example, is estimated more than 300 billion dollar (Kennedy Consulting Research & Advisory, 2009), which indicates the industry's economic relevance. Moreover, consultancies are also acknowledged as important providers of knowledge (Wright & Kitay, 2004; Engwall & Kipping, 2006; Whittle, 2008) to managers in companies all over the world and have gained more and more influence on politics and society (Saint-Martin, 1998, 1999; Mohe, 2008).

Parallel to the growing economic and societal influence of management consultancies, researchers started to investigate the consulting industry. An increasing number of articles and books have explored different perspectives of consulting and several journals have edited special issues on consulting themes (e.g. *International Studies of Management and Organizations*).

Despite this increasing research on management consulting, only little is known about management consulting research itself. Although we find some reviews on specific topics, like client-consultant relationship (Werr & Styhre, 2002; Kakabadse et al., 2006) or on management topics in consulting literature (O'Mahoney et al., 2008), up to now a comprehensive overview of the entire research field is lacking. Since management consulting has not established as an own research field with related journals, research on management consulting is so far rather scattered and fragmented which further creates demand for a comprehensive literature review.

This article provides first findings of a still ongoing research project on the status quo of academic management consulting research. On the basis of 167 articles published between 1990 and 2008, we aim to present developments within the field of academic management consulting research and to pinpoint current research trends.

This review does not point out new specific research questions or recommend the application of certain theories or methods. Instead, it is a reflection of what has been researched by now and how research has been conducted so far. In detail, we address the following questions:

- (1) How did management consulting research develop over time?
- (2) Who are the key participants in management consulting research?
- (3) Which topics are prominently discussed in management consulting research?
- (4) Which methodologies and theories are applied to study management consulting?

In the first part, we outline the methodology on which our research is based. Afterwards, we present the findings of our study with regard to our research questions. Starting with the development of management consulting research, we subsequently discuss the key participants of management consulting research and the thematized topics. In the next part, we present findings related to methodologies and theories. Finally, we summarize and discuss the key findings of our study and unfold the limitations of our study.

Methodology

Since literature reviews are regarded as empirical examination of the related scientific community (Montouri, 2005), our approach was similar to an empirical study. We select content analysis (Krippendorff, 1980) as method for our inquiry since we argue that the best knowledge about a scientific discipline can be generated by analysing its body of knowledge. In the second step, we defined the population for our review since it was not possible to research the entire literature about management consulting. Hence, we had to set selection criteria for the inclusion of articles in our study. Since no own management consulting journals exist, we had to search consulting literature across different journals. We decided to use search engines which allow us to obtain a comprehensive overview of the field of social sciences.

We selected *Business Source Premier* (includes more than 1,100 peer-reviewed business publications), *EconLit* (includes more than 1,000,000 records) and *Web of*

Sciences (includes more than 1,950 journals covering more than 50 social science disciplines) as research databases for our review.

To be included in our review, the articles had to fulfil the following criteria: (1) since the early 1990's are supposed to be the starting point of a more intensive management consulting research (Fincham & Clark, 2002b; Armbrüster, 2006) the articles have to be published between January 1990 and December 2008 and (2) the key words "business consult*" or "management consult*" have to occur either in abstract, headline or key words. From this search, we obtained 1,258 articles from *Business Source Premier* and *EconLit* and 423 articles from *Web of Science*. We screened the articles and included all which (1) were published in peer reviewed academic journals, (2) were written in English and (3) had a focus on management or business consulting. A total of 167 articles fulfilled these criteria and were included in our review.

Coding

The final sample of articles has been analysed by means of a content analysis (Krippendorff, 1980; Weber, 1985) in respect of four fields of interest (authors, methods, topics and theories). Here, we followed a combination of deductive and inductive coding approaches (e.g. Epstein & Martin, 2005).

Based on a deductive coding approach, the categories "origin", "profession", and "method" have been labelled in a codebook prior to the analysis. Whereas the coding-field "origin" is based upon geographical sectioning by countryside of the authors, the field "profession" is classified by the authors' affiliation. The codes for the field "methods" go back to the most common research methods within qualitative and quantitative approaches including mixed designs (e.g. Creswell, 2003). Case studies, either being single or multi case compiled (Yin, 1999), have been dealt with separately – again from a quantitative, qualitative and mixed point of design – since case studies represent a different research strategy in contrast to surveys of large populations (Stake, 1995; Yin, 1999). All codes for each field of interest (origin, profession, method) have been checked to be non-overlapping.

As suggested by MacQueen et al. (1998) a “keeper of the Codebook” has been designated to follow up code revisions that have become necessary during the coding process to tighten up the categories to the point that maximizes mutual exclusivity and exhaustiveness. This adaptation process of the codebook is quite usual since “[g]ood codebooks are developed and refined as the research goes along” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000a, p. 781).

Since consulting research is meant to be “atheoretical” (Sturdy et al., 2004, p. 337) and ‘typical’ topics are as well not precisely defined, codes could not be established prior to this analysis. Thus, we used an inductive approach for the field of interest “themes” and “theories” whose procedure has been made explicit in the codebook. For the coding of the themes, the central research question has been singled out for each article whereas the first inductive codes emerged in the course of interpreting the content (e.g. David & Sutton, 2004). Secondly, this new “meta-content” has been clustered by means of recurring foci independently by multiple coders. Thirdly, these foci have been sorted into thematic piles to consolidate the inductive codes. The final list of codes has been checked if it still fits the content. The same procedure has been used for the field of theories. Since it is contentious what is a theory and what is not a theory (cf. the discussion in *Administrative Science Quarterly*: DiMaggio, 1995; Sutton & Staw, 1995; Weick, 1995), we decided to excerpt every model and every concept, respectively, which is asserted by the authors to be a theory.

Issues of Reliability of the Coding Procedure

“Without the establishment of reliability, content analysis measures are useless” (Neuendorf, 2002, p.141) because the reliability of the codings would be uncertain and the findings therefore questionable. Hence, we tested the reliability of the coding on an intracoder and intercoder level.

All in all two authors coded each half of the sample separately following the instructions of the codebook. To validate the coding procedure, the intracoder reliability of the authors has been calculated in the first step using Holsti’s reliability test (Holsti, 1969). Here, the authors coded 5% of their part of the sample (randomized selection) three weeks after their first coding for a second run. Above that, the level of intercoder reliability has been calculated again using Holsti’s

reliability test on a two level basis: (1) the researchers coded 5% of the half of the whole sample they have not coded beforehand (randomized selection) (2) two colleagues, not involved in the review, have been asked for coding 5% of the whole sample (separated randomized selection of the coded part-sample of each of the authors). Table 1 summarizes the results of the intracoder and intercoder reliability tests which altogether come up with a reasonable high level of correspondency of at least 89.6% for intracoder as well as for intercoder reliability.

	Intracoder	Intercomder
Author 1	96.3%	89.6%
Author 2	100%	97.6%

Table 1: Results of the Holsti reliability test on an intra- and intercomder level

The Status quo of Management Consulting Research

Commonly, it is assumed that research on management consulting has experienced a tremendous growth in the 1990s. Armbrüster (2006, p. 1), for example, argued that “[o]nly since the 1990s has management consultancy prompted a great deal of attention in management research” (similarly cf. Fincham & Clark, 2002b). Our data, however, partly question such appraisals (see table 2). While an average of 8.8 articles has been published per year (SD: 6.1) over the whole period of our inquiry, our findings reveal significant increases between the four five-years-periods. In the first ten years (1990-1999) 4.2 articles have been published per year, while for the second decade we find an average of 13.9 articles. The maximum amount of articles published in the first decade of our research was eight (each 1998 and 1999) compared to 19 articles (each 2006 and 2007) in the second period.

	1990-1994	1995-1999	2000-2004	2005-2008
Number of articles	17	25	55	70
	42		125	
	167			
Articles per year (average)	3.4	5.0	11.0	17.5
	4.2		13.9	
	8.8			

Table 2: Descriptive analysis of articles over time

We build a dummy variable for the time periods in order to test if the differences between the means of published articles over time are significant. Our MANOVA (multivariate analysis of variance) ($\alpha = .05$) indicated significant differences between at least two of the four groups ($F = 28.926$; $p = .000$). Using Scheffé’s method, we found significant differences for the means of each period except between period one

and two (table 3). Therefore, we can state that the amount of papers concerning with management consulting research has significantly increased in the periods 2000-2004 and 2005-2008 while no difference can be found between the first two periods.

Group 1	Group 2	Post-Hoc Test	Significance
1990-1994	1995-1999	-1.600	.797
	2000-2004	-7.600*	.002
	2005-2008	-14,100**	.000
1995-1999	2000-2004	-6.000*	.016
	2005-2008	-12.500**	.000
2000-2004	2005-2008	-6.500*	.014

Table 3: Post-Hoc test of group means (* p < .05; ** p < .01)

A further common assumption is that the increase in management consulting research is caused by the economic growth of the global consulting industry: “The main reason for the development of academic interest in the work of management consultants has been the increased economic significance of the industry” (Fincham & Clark, 2002a, p. 3). We scrutinize this assumption by means of a regression analysis. We analyse to what extend the development of articles are influenced by the global turnover of the industry according to Kennedy Information (2003).¹ Due to missing data we focus on the period 1992-2005.

Since a time lag of at least one year occurs between writing and publishing academic articles, we included this lag in our analysis. The finding reveals that the hypothesis of a correlation between economic growth and increased academic attention can be accepted ($F = 31.498$; $p = .00$). The regression analysis even indicated a very high influence of the industry’s turnover on the quantity of management consulting research ($R^2 = .724$).²

¹ Kennedy Information provides data on the consulting industry once a year on a commercial basis (the enterprise license for the current report, for example, costs US-\$ 24,975). Since we were only able to assess the 2003-study, we had to refer to these data.

² Data of the global consulting market for the years 1990-1991 and 2006-2008 were not available.

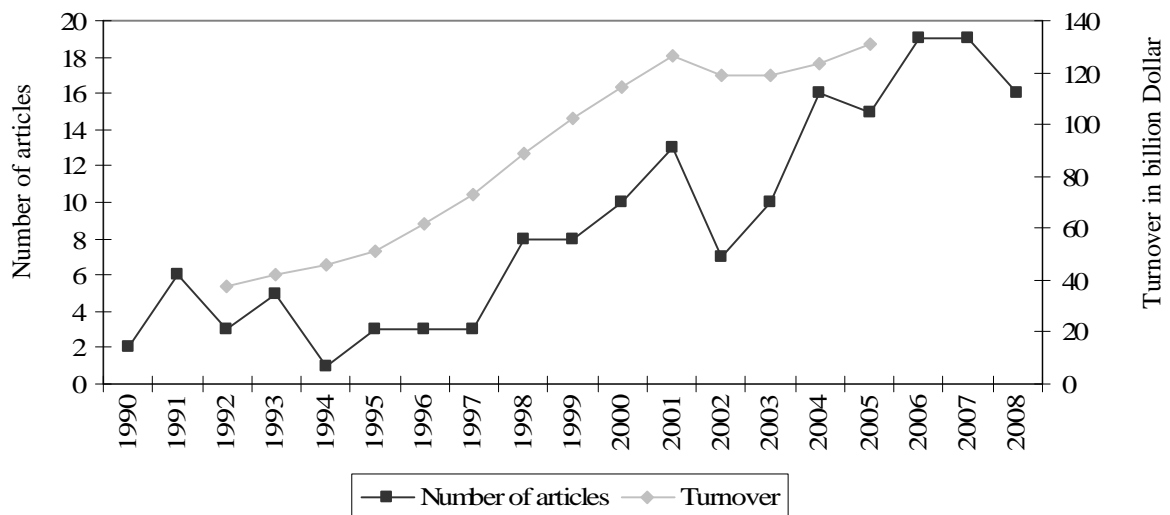


Figure 1: Development of published articles on management consulting and turnover of global consulting industry (Source: Kennedy Information, 2003). Turnover for 2004 and 2005 as estimated by Kennedy

Since no leading medium for academic studies about management consulting exists, researchers have to publish their articles in journals of related disciplines. Our data confirm a high dispersion of articles in various journals. The 167 articles included in our study were published in 93 different journals. Only 16 journals have published more than two articles since 1990, with eight of these 16 journals addressing more or less the field of organization studies (see table 4).

Name of Journal	Scope of Journal	Total (%)
1. Journal of Organizational Change Management	Organizational Change	8 (4.73%)
2. Journal of Management Studies	Organization theory Organization behaviour Strategic management Human resource management	7 (4.14%)
3. Management Learning	Learning in organization/management Knowing in organizations/management	7 (4.14%)
4. Organization Studies	Organizations Organization theory	7 (4.14%)
5. Management Decision	Management practices	6 (3.55%)
6. Organization	Organizations Organization theory	6 (3.55%)
7. Human Relations	Social relationships at work Practices that affect work and work Organizations	5 (2.96%)
8. Service Industries Journal	Service Industries Management of Services	5 (2.96%)
9. Business and Economic History	Economic History	4 (2.37%)
10. International Studies of Management & Organization	Business and Management Studies of Organizations	4 (2.37%)
11. Strategic Management Journal	Theory/practice of strategic	4 (2.37%)

	management	
12. Business History	Business history	3 (1.78%)
13. Environment and Planning A	Spatial organizations	3 (1.78%)
	Restructuring of cities and regions	
14. International Journal of Public Sector Management	Aspects of public sector management	3 (1.78%)
15. Journal of Management Development	Development of managers	3 (1.78%)
16. Regional Studies	Research on regions	3 (1.78%)
	Others (two or less articles)	89 (53.3%)
Total		167 (100%)

Table 4: Number of Articles per Journal

Besides clarifying the question when and where research on management consulting has been published, we also aim to know who the consulting researchers are. For this purpose, we analyzed the authorship of the articles in our sample. We found out that a total of 160 authors were involved in just one article, 29 in two and 19 in three or more articles (see table 5). None author published at least one paper in every period and only six authors managed to publish one in three periods. Ten authors started participating in consulting research not before 2000 while two authors (Keeble and Wood) published three papers (together with Bryson) focusing on business services/management consulting in the first period but none afterwards. This might be a sign for different generations of consulting researchers. Especially Fincham, Sturdy, Clark, Werr and Kipping can be regard as core-authors. They have started to publish very early on and still head the list of authors.

Author	Number of Articles				Total
	1990-1994	1995-1999	2000-2004	2005-2008	
Fincham	0	1	3	3	7
Wright	0	0	4	3	7
Sturdy	0	1	1	4	6
Werr	0	1	3	2	6
Clark	0	1	2	2	5
Glückler	0	0	1	4	5
Kipping	0	2	1	2	5
Richter	0	0	1	4	5
Alvesson	0	0	2	2	4
Bryson	3	0	0	1	4
Kärreman	0	0	2	2	4
Kitay	0	0	3	1	4
Saint-Martin	0	2	1	1	4
Whittle	0	0	0	4	4
Armbrüster	0	0	2	1	3
Handley	0	0	1	2	3
Keeble	3	0	0	0	3
Schmidt	0	0	0	3	3
Wood	3	0	0	0	3

Table 5: Authors with at least three publications on management consulting research

Overall, 61 articles have been written by a single author, 74 by two and 32 by three or more authors (see table 6). The average number of authors was at its maximum in the first period from 1990 until 1994 with an average of 2.24 authors per paper while the lowest rate was in the second period with an average of 1.44. However, our MANOVA ($\alpha = .05$) indicated no significant difference between the four groups ($F = 2.230$; $p = .087$).

Concerning the number of cross-boarder publications we find a total of 20 articles in which researches from at least two different countries were involved. Since 1990, we can state a slight, but – according to our contingency table – not significant ($\chi^2 = .785$; $p = .853$) increase in cross-boarder publications.

	1990-1994	1995-1999	2000-2004	2005-2008
Single authorship	4	16	18	24
Two authors	6	5	29	34
Three or more authors	7	4	8	12
Average number of authors	2.24	1.44	1.89	1.87
Cross-boarder publication (as percentage of articles with at least two authors)	2 (15.4%)	1 (11.1%)	7 (18.4%)	10 (22.2%)

Table 6: Number of authors per article

In order to identify core regions of consulting research, we identify where the researchers had been employed when publishing the article. We do not divide the authors in first, second, etc. since the order is often determined by the authors' last name and counted authors several times in cases when they appeared on more than one article. Our respective data indicate a predominance of researchers based in Europe with a total of 193 authors (61.7%) followed by North America ($n = 60$; 19.2%) and Australia ($n = 43$; 13.7%). Authors from Asia ($n = 13$; 4.2%) and Africa ($n = 4$; 1.3%) can be found rather seldom in our sample.

Continent	Number of Authors
Europe	193 (61.7%)
North America	60 (19.2%)
Australia + Oceania	43 (13.7%)
Asia	13 (4.2%)
Africa	4 (1.3%)

Table 7: Number of authors per continent

Concerning the individual countries we find a predominance of Great Britain (see table 8). In the first ten years (1990-1999) authors from Great Britain had an average of 15.5 articles, which more than doubled in the following nine years with an average

of 34.0 articles. The appearance of authors from US, on the contrary, remained relatively constant during these 19 years with an average in the first decade of 13.0 and 12.5 in the second. Authors from both countries account for 84.2% of all authorships in the first five years and 64.1% in the following five until 1999. After that, however, their proportion sunk to 32.7% (2000-2004) and 44.3% (2005-2008), respectively. The Hirschman-Herfindahl index (HHI) as a common instrument to measure the market concentration in industries confirmed our findings above since it decreases over time and reaches its minimum of 0.069 in the period between 2000 and 2004.

Country	1990-1994	1995-1999	2000-2004	2005-2008	Total
Great Britain	17	14	26	42	99 (31.6%)
USA	15	11	9	16	51 (16.3%)
Australia	4	6	22	6	38 (12.1%)
Sweden	0	3	13	10	26 (8.3%)
Germany	0	0	5	15	20 (6.4%)
Netherlands	0	0	10	9	19 (6.1%)
France	0	0	6	4	10 (3.2%)
Canada	0	0	3	6	9 (2.9%)
Finland	0	0	3	3	6 (1.9%)
New Zealand	0	0	1	4	5 (1.6%)
South Korea	0	4	0	0	4 (1.3%)
Norway	0	0	1	2	3 (1.0%)
Others (less than 3 articles)	2	1	6	14	23 (7.3%)
Total	38	39	107	131	313 (100%)
Percentage contribution of Great Britain and USA	84.2%	64.1%	32.7%	44.3%	47.9%
Hirschman-Herfindahl index of Great Britain and USA	0.356	0.208	0.069	0.118	0.127

Table 8: Location of institution of management consulting researchers

Compared to Great Britain authors from Sweden, Germany, the Netherlands, France, Finland and Norway have comparably seldom published articles in the period before the year 2000, while they turned their attention to this research focus since then.³ Expressed in numbers, only three of these authors published articles before the year 2000, compared to 91 in the following years. This increasing interest of authors from Europe on management consulting parallels the growing economic significance of the management consulting industry in Europe (Fincham & Clark, 2002a). While the consulting services had experienced a tremendous growth in Great Britain during the

³ It should be noted that our study did not include papers published in languages unlike English. Thus, we cannot make a statement about management consulting research which has been published in national journals.

1980s (Keeble et al., 1991; Bryson et al., 1993), this ‘boom’ slops to continental Europe during the 1990s (see table 9). However, the ‘boom’ ended in the beginning of the new millennium, e.g. due to the burst of the dotcom bubble. Therefore, we can argue that the economic growth of management consulting industry is just one influencing factor for the increased attention of European researchers.

	1998	2000	2002	2004
France	1.8	7.3	6.2	5.9
Germany	9.5	12.2	13.0	13.3
Netherlands	0.7	1.5	2.0	2.0
Sweden	0.9 ⁴	0.8	0.8	not available
UK	5.8	11.0	13.5	14.2

Table 9: Size of consulting market in billion Euro (FEACO, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2002, 2004)

Topics in Management Consulting Research

When looking at the last 19 years of consulting research, we can identify a large range of topics, researchers have dealt with. As result of the inductive coding and consolidation process, we came up with 15 categories. Our findings reveal that the historical and geographical development of the consulting sector has been the topic with most attention (23 articles), followed by functions of consulting (16 articles), factors of consulting success/performance (16 articles) and HRM/education of management consultants (15 articles) (see table 10).

Over the years, the thematic focus of the articles has shifted. While the historical and geographical development was the most researched topic from 1990 until 1994, the analysis of factors influencing consulting success/performance came up during the years from 1995 until 1999. Functions of consulting experienced a tremendous growth and came up with eight articles in the period 2000-2004. A similar growth can be revealed for human resources management/education of management consultants, which has become the predominant research topic from 2005-2008 with eleven articles.

We measured the heterogeneity of management consulting research with regard to the topics (Bettencourt & Houston, 2001; Kirchler & Hölzl, 2006). By measuring the share of the top three categories for each period over the four periods of our study

⁴ These data refer to 1999 since no data for 1998 were available.

we can identify a decrease of the share of the top three categories. While they started with 58.8% and increased to 60.0% from the first to the second period, the share had decreased to 36.4% and 35.7% in period three and four. The HHI confirms our findings. We can detect a tremendous decrease of the HHI from 1990 until 2008 which indicates that the topics discussed in management consulting research have become more diverse since the “market” share of the top three topics in each period sunk (see table 10).

Topic	1990-1994	1995-1999	2000-2004	2005-2008	Total
Development of consulting sector (historically and geographically)	5	6	5	7	23
Factors of consulting success/ performance (incl. measurement)	2	6	3	5	16
Function of Consulting	1	0	8	6	15
HRM/education of MC	1	0	3	11	15
Client-consultant relationship	1	3	5	5	14
Roles of consultants/clients	0	1	6	5	12
Purchasing (incl. selection and evaluation)	2	1	3	5	11
Firm characteristics of consultancies	0	1	2	7	10
Internationalization	0	2	3	5	10
Knowledge management storage/sharing	0	1	3	4	8
Identity/identification	0	0	3	2	5
Consulting tools	1	1	2	1	5
Response/reply?	0	0	3	2	5
Consulting in practice	1	2	0	2	5
Others (e.g. ethics)	3	1	6	3	13
Total	17	25	55	70	167
Percentage contribution of top three categories	58.8%	60.0%	36.4%	35.7%	32.3%
Hirschman-Herfindahl index	0.131	0.129	0.045	0.048	0.039

Table 10: Overview of topics in consulting research

Empirical Research

Several researchers have stressed the difficulties of gaining empirical inside into management consulting business. Sturdy (1997, p. 390), for example, points that “very little empirical research on the practices and perceptions of both consultants and their clients [exists]” while Bloomfield and Danieli (1995, p. 25) noted that “the practice of management consultancy represents something of a conundrum.” Indeed, gathering data on management consulting is a striving task (Sturdy, 2009). On the one hand, consultants had to protect the secrets of their clients and, on the other hand, also their own (Lapsley & Oldfield, 2001). Because of the sensibility of

consulting projects, gaining access to clients is a difficult task, too. Despite these unfavourable circumstances, our findings reveal that a vast majority of 130 articles (77.8%) are empirical papers while 37 (22.2%) are conceptual ones.

Our data, however, confirm Sturdy’s and Bloomfield/Danieli’s thesis insofar that there was indeed little empirical research in the mid of the 1990s. As the chronological development of the empirical research reveals, 101 studies (77.7%) were conducted since the year 2000 compared to 29 (22.3%) during the years from 1990 until 1999. Especially research focusing on consultants has gained increasing attention in this decade since 65 of 80 studies (81.3%) researching consultants have been conducted from the year 2000 onwards. A combined research focus on clients and consultants has also significantly increased with 17 of 21 studies (81.0%) in the second decade of our research. The number of studies gathering data from clients has only slightly increased in the second decade with 13 approaches (56.5%). Although many former consultants “changed sights” and became members of their former client organizations, only one study has so far investigated and directly surveyed this ‘consulting diaspora’ (Sturdy & Wright, 2008).

Period	Consultants	Clients	Client and Consultant	Others (e.g. professors)	Students	Former consultants	Total
1990-1994	8	3	2	0	0	0	13
1995-1999	7	7	2	0	0	0	16
2000-2004	28	4	8	2	0	0	42
2005-2008	37	9	9	1	2	1	59
Total	80	23	21	3	2	1	130

Table 11: Sources of data gathering in empirical research

Concerning the methods applied in the 130 empirical studies, 59 (45.0%) built on case studies from which 34 (57.6%) present single and 25 (42.4%) multi case studies.

Furthermore, we can state a dominance of qualitative approaches. With 82 applications, the interview is the most frequently applied method in consulting research (see table 12). Other qualitative methods applied are non-participating observation (19 applications), document analysis (18) as well as action research (eight). With regard to the quantitative methods the questionnaire is the most often applied research method with 49 applications while statistical data analyses are applied nine times.

Over the total period of time, the interview has increasingly been applied with a tremendous growth from the second to the third period. Compared to that, the application of questionnaires only moderately increased with a maximum of 17 applications in the last period. Overall, if we distinguish the methodology in qualitative (interview, non-participating observation, document analysis and action research) and quantitative (questionnaire and secondary data analysis) research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000b), we find qualitative methods increasingly being applied since the year 2000, while quantitative methodologies have grown more slowly (see table 12).

	1990-1994	1995-1999	2000-2004	2005-2008	Total
Interview	6	8	29	39	82
Non-participant observation	1	1	7	10	19
Document analysis	1	1	5	11	18
Action Research	0	1	4	3	8
∑ Qualitative Methodology	8	9	45	63	127
Questionnaire	9	9	14	17	49
Secondary data analysis	1	0	0	8	9
∑ Quantitative Methodology	10	9	14	25	58

Table 12: Overview of applied research methods

Moreover, our data reveal that the research methods have not been equally applied to the different sources of data gathering. Consultants, for example, are frequently interviewed by researchers. In a total of 53 studies, researchers made use of this methodology to gather data. Questionnaires are only half as much used with regard to consultants as interviews. Clients, on the other hand, are more often surveyed by questionnaire (17) than by interview (12). According to our sample, no article has so far exclusively observed the behaviour of clients when dealing with consultants while eleven studies (seven non-participant observations plus four action researches) presented data about client and consultant in the project context by using a form of observation.

	Consultants	Clients	Client and Consultants	Others (e.g. professors)	Students	Former consultants
Interview	53	12	17	0	0	1
Non-participant observation	12	0	7	0	0	0
Action Research	3	0	4	0	1	0
Document analysis	10	1	4	0	2	0
Questionnaire	26	17	3	2	1	0
Secondary data analysis	9	0	0	0	0	0

Table 13: Sources of data gathering and applied methodologies

Utilization of Theories and Methods in Consulting Research

Commonly, management consulting research is described as “largely sterile, atheoretical and overly prescriptive” (Sturdy et al., 2004, p. 337). Our analysis confirms that statement and reveals that only a minority of 38 articles on management consulting (22.8%) apply a theory while 129 articles (77.2%) do not (see table 14). With regard to the different topics discussed in consulting research, we can state that articles of no topic come up with at least 50% papers applying theory. With 42.6%, the client-consultant relationship is the topic with most theory applied. Moreover, it is interesting to notice that only 31 (18.6%) articles apply both empirical data and theory.

	Σ	Empirical Paper		Theory Use		Empirical + Theory	
		Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Functions of consulting	18	15 (83.3)	3 (16.7)	6 (33.3)	12 (66.7)	6 (33.3)	12 (66.7)
(Factors of consulting success / performance (incl. measurement)	15	14 (93.3)	1 (6.7)	1 (6.7)	14 (93.3)	1 (6.7)	14 (93.3)
(Firm) characteristics of consultancies	10	6 (60%)	4 (40%)	3 (30%)	7 (70%)	2 (20%)	8 (80%)
Historical / geographical development of consulting sector	23	12 (52.2%)	11 (47.8%)	3 (13.0%)	20 (87.0)	0 (0.0%)	21 (100%)
Client-consultant relationship	14	13 (92.9%)	1 (7.1%)	6 (42.9%)	8 (57.1%)	6 (42.9%)	8 (57.1%)
Consulting tools	5	4 (80.0%)	1 (20.0%)	1 (20.0%)	4 (80.0%)	1 (20.0%)	4 (80.0%)
HRM / education of MC	15	14 (93.3%)	1 (6.7%)	2 (13.3%)	13 (86.7%)	2 (13.3%)	13 (86.7%)
Identity / identification	5	5 (100%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (40.0%)	3 (60.0%)	2 (40.0%)	3 (60.0%)
Internationalization	10	9 (90.0%)	1 (10.0%)	4 (40.0%)	6 (60.0%)	4 (40.0%)	6 (60.0%)
Knowledge management storage	8	7 (87.5%)	1 (12.5%)	1 (12.5%)	7 (87.5%)	1 (12.5%)	7 (87.5%)
Purchasing (incl. selection and evaluation)	11	10 (90.9%)	1 (9.1%)	0 (0.0%)	11 (100%)	0 (0.0%)	11 (100%)
Responses / replies	5	0 (0.0%)	5 (100%)	0 (0.0%)	5 (100%)	0 (0.0%)	5 (100%)
Roles of Consultants / clients	10	9 (90.0%)	1 (10.0%)	4 (40.0%)	6 (60.0%)	3 (30.0%)	7 (70.0%)
Consulting in practice	5	2 (40.0%)	3 (60.0%)	0 (0.0%)	5 (100%)	0 (0.0%)	5 (100%)
Others	13	10 (76.9%)	3 (23.1%)	5 (38.5%)	8 (61.5%)	3 (23.1%)	10 (76.9%)
Total	167	130 (77.8%)	37 (22.2%)	38 (22.8%)	129 (77.2%)	31 (18.6%)	136 (81.4%)

Table 14: Overview of theories applied to topics and empirical research

Most of the applied theories stemmed from different scientific disciplines like sociology, geography and economics. As the large amount of different applied theories indicates, a leading theoretical paradigm in management consulting research can not be identified. Instead, consulting research can be classified as relatively heterogeneous field based on different theoretical approaches. The HHI confirms this with a very low concentration rate of the top three theories of .015 (see table 15).

Theory	Number of applications	Theory	Number of applications
Institutional theory (agency theory, property rights theory)	3	Organizational Boundaries (Granovetter)	1
Embeddedness theory	3	Logic of Practice	1
Resource-based view	2	Management fashion theory	1
Actor network theory	2	New institutional theory	1
Concept of liminality	2	Behaviorial decision theory	1
Sensemaking	2	Dramaturgical Metaphor	1
Discourse approach	1	Perspectives on realizing change	1
Limits of cluster	1	Pre-entry phase model of	1
Theory/agglomeration theory		Management consultancy	
Guiellen's concept of management intellectuals	1	Relational approach to internationalization	1
Environment strategy capability gap	1	Concept of organizational memory	1
Firm-in-sector theory	1	Human Ecology Theory	1
Forms of management control	1	Role theory	1
Forms of managerial control	1	Situated learning theory	1
Framework von Latour	1	Sociology of Translation	1
Fame theory	1	Symbolism	1
Organizational discourse approach	1	Theories of competition	1
		Total	38
		HHI of top three theories	.015

Table 15: Theories applied in management consulting research

Review and Discussion

Our study aimed to give insight in the development of management consulting research over a time-period of 19 years, from 1990 until 2008. We analysed a total of 167 studies by applying content analysis. Our analyses provide interesting findings in the field of management consulting research.

First, with regard to the development of management consulting research over time, our findings reveal a significant increase in the number of management consulting articles. A special increase is observable since the turn of the century. Furthermore,

our findings confirm the hypothesis of a direct influence of the economic growth of management consulting sector on the academic interests in this industry as argued by several researchers (e.g. Fincham & Clark, 2002a). Since researchers have to justify their object of research towards editors and reviewers in journals, it is, in many cases, easier for industries with a high economic significance.

Second, our findings reveal a dominance of Anglo-American authors in the first two periods of our research. We can explain this with regard to the development of consulting sector in both countries. The origin of management consulting is located in the USA where the first consultancies like McKinsey & Co and Arthur D. Little emerged at the beginning of the 20th century (McKenna (1995), which internationalized from there to Great Britain by following their US-based clients to their British dependencies. Consequently, the British consulting industry experienced its first tremendous growth in the 1980s (Bryson et al., 1993; Wood et al., 1993) while the industry in continental Europe grew in the 1990s (FEACO, 1998). Therefore, it could be assumed that the dominance of Anglo-American authors in the 1990s is caused by the economic significance of the industry in these countries in the early 1990s. This explanation is supported by our regression analysis which detects a high correlation between the turnover of consulting industry and the number of published articles. Subsequently, the growing significance of management consulting in Europe fostered the growing interest of authors from continental Europe in consulting research since 2000. However, in recent years, it seems as if management consulting research – at least in Europe – has “disconnected” itself from consulting turnovers. Despite of the crisis of the European consulting market between 2002 and 2004, management consulting research in these European countries had further increased which supports our assumption.

Third, our analysis of topics in management consulting research further confirmed the common notion of a heterogeneous field of research. As the low score of the HHI indicated, no leading research topic can be asserted in consulting research. Instead, researchers focus on a bunch of different topics. Nevertheless, we observe some foci in management consulting research. First, our findings reveal a particular interest in the development of the consulting sector, both from a historical and geographical perspective. This research has attracted most attention and has little vacillates over

time. Similarly, factors affecting consulting success/performance were investigated 16 times during the 19 years of our inquiry. In recent years, however, we can observe the emergence of new topics, primarily human resources management and educating management consultants. This increase takes into account the growth of university management consulting programs (Adams & Zanzi, 2004; Schmidt & Richter, 2006) as well as the growing interest in human resources practices in management consulting companies (e.g. Armbrüster, 2004; Alvesson & Karreman, 2007; Kumra & Vinnicombe, 2008).

Fourth, with regard to the applied methods, our findings prove that researchers – despite well known difficulties to gather respective data – get increasingly empirical access to the industry. More than three-fourth of all articles included in the study work with empirical data. We can explain this by the notion, that manuscripts containing empirical data are meant to have better chances to get accepted for publishing in journals. By doing so, researchers do not focus on one special method but apply several methods for gathering data. Interestingly, our data indicated something like a paradigm shift in consulting research in favour of qualitative methods. These methods have increasingly been applied from 2000 onwards. This might be caused by a “qualitative turn” which has been observed in several disciplines (e.g. Jensen, 1991). Furthermore, as described by van Maanen (1998), editors increasingly call for qualitative research approaches which fosters the application of these methods. As critical note with regard to methodology we have to mention that a certain number of studies (13; 9.9%) do not depict their empirical methods in detail. Especially with regard to case studies, authors often neither mention the number of conducted interviews nor describe how their observation was methodologically done. This absence of such descriptions can be found independent from the publication date. Since such descriptions are essential for an appraisal of presented findings, it would be preferable to put more stress on applied methodology in publications to further improve the quality of management consulting research.

Fifth, our inquiry of applied theories again confirmed the hypothesis of a heterogeneous field of research. No leading theoretical paradigm could be found and our HHI indicated a high dispersion of applied theories in consulting research, which fits the heterogeneity of topics. More interesting and critical is the absence of theories

in quite a number of articles which parallels finding from organization studies (Grunow, 1995). The absence of theoretical explanations in management consulting research is critical for two reasons. First, the contribution of management consulting researchers to theory development is questionable since a large amount of researchers neglect to control theories for their empirical adequacy to either confirm or discard them and therefore to further develop scientific knowledge (Shugan, 2006). Second, the lack of theory also leads to ad hoc explanations of empirical findings by authors (Parsons, 1948). In that case, authors apply their own implicit theoretical explanations for the empirical phenomenon without revealing which underlying assumptions are implied in these explanations. This leads to the problem that their “personal theories” can not be controlled for their adequacy by other researchers and therefore neither revised nor altered. Hence, this theory would be invulnerable until it is released by a contrary “personal theory”. If management consulting researchers aim to contribute to the development of related scientific disciplines, as argued by Clark et al. (2007), they have to apply theories or develop new ones in order to increase scientific knowledge. This is not a claim against empirical research. We can argue with Hambrick (2007) that the identification of an empirical phenomenon is prior to its theoretical explanation and is an important task of scientific research, too. Hambrick also points, that the requirement of “strong theoretical contributions” by certain leading journals implies that strong empirical papers have no chance to get published. Nevertheless, the connection of strong empirical *and* theoretical work contributes to a higher degree to the development of knowledge, as indicated by Popper’s (1934/1972) critical rationalism. Therefore, we follow the calls of authors like Knottnerus (2005) and Sutton/Staw (1995) for a more intensive discussion about theories and apply this criticism to management consulting research. If we aim to generate new knowledge about the consulting industry and its influence on society we have to base this knowledge on theories in order to unfold this knowledge for control and revision.

Limitations

The limitations of our research are related to our methodology. Although we aim to give a comprehensive overview of the field of management consulting research, we were naturally not able to investigate all articles published in our period of

investigation. Using search engines always implies that articles published in edited volumes or journals which are not included in the selected search engines could not be considered in the review. Although sometimes recommended (e.g. Rialp et al., 2005) because of the possibility to include additional articles, we decided not to include any further article although known to us since this purposive selection of articles would influence the findings due to the arbitrariness of the inclusion. This approach, however, affects the breadth of our findings which is constraint to academic peer reviewed journal articles.

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A list of all 167 articles included in the review can be requested from the authors.