

## Commodifying the Commodifiers: The Impact of Procurement on Management Knowledge

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**ABSTRACT** Current conceptualizations of the commodification of management knowledge prioritize the agency of knowledge producers, such as consultancies, but downplay the role of other actors such as intermediaries. Using a qualitative multi-method study of the role of procurement in sourcing consultancy knowledge, we demonstrate how intermediaries also commodify management knowledge, thereby limiting the exchange value of that knowledge. Through our analysis we develop a more sophisticated model of the processes and consequences of knowledge commodification. This model clarifies and extends prior research by highlighting the role of commensuration, comparison and valuation, as well as the related tactics that consultants and client managers use to resist procurement's attempts to commodify management knowledge.

**Keywords:** commodification, consumers, intermediaries, management consultancies, management knowledge, procurement

### INTRODUCTION

The growth of the management knowledge industry over the last 50 years has resulted in increased research attention paid to the activities and impact of knowledge producers such as business schools, management gurus, publishers, and consultancies (see, e.g. Abrahamson, 1996; Clark and Salaman, 1998; Heusinkveld and Benders, 2002, 2005; Huczynski, 1993; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2001; Werr and Stjernberg, 2003). Many of these studies have shown how the commodification of management knowledge assists these actors in improving sales (Abrahamson, 1996; Fincham, 1995), enabling effective business models (Benders and van Veen, 2001; Heusinkveld and Benders, 2005; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2001), and supporting a lifecycle of new products and services (Hansen et al., 1999; Morris, 2001). However, whilst these studies have developed our understanding of how knowledge producers commodify management knowledge, less

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attention has been directed towards other stakeholders, such as knowledge consumers (for example, consultancy clients or business students) or intermediaries (such as brokers, procurers, or research councils) in this process. Of these two groups, more emphasis has been placed upon consumers, who are often treated as victims of commodification (Adcroft and Willis, 2005; Webb, 1999; Willis, 1991), whilst the impact of intermediaries on knowledge commodification has all but been ignored.

The primacy of the producer in accounts of knowledge commodification conflicts with wider studies that emphasize the interactive nature of management knowledge and stress the agency of, amongst others, consumers and intermediaries (Benders and van Veen, 2001; Clark and Salaman, 1998; Nicolai and Dautwiz, 2010; Sturdy, 1997). In the sociology of consumption literature, for example, knowledge intermediaries are shown to play an important proactive role in controlling and modifying management knowledge (Dunn, 2008; Featherstone, 1990; Fine, 2002). We suggest that a greater understanding of how intermediaries contribute to, or resist, commodification when sourcing or brokering management knowledge might not only improve our understanding of the role of intermediaries, but also help to develop our conceptualization of what commodification is and how it occurs.

In this article we explore the impact of intermediaries on management knowledge by analysing how the procurement function is involved in the purchase of management knowledge from consultancies and contributes to the commodification of that knowledge. By 'management knowledge' we mean the methods, services, expertise, or skills aimed at improving the co-ordination and exploitation of organizational resources. As such, management knowledge includes both the representations and descriptions of such knowledge (for example in contracts, proposals, or presentations), and its actual practice or implementation in an organization (Benders and van Veen, 2001; Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall, 2002). Our findings suggest that in seeking to both drive down purchasing costs and exert their legitimacy, procurers exert a strong commodifying effect upon the knowledge sold by consultancies. Based on these findings we develop a model of the processes and consequences of knowledge commodification. As such, the study makes three important contributions.

First, we show that intermediaries commodify management knowledge. Whilst many studies have highlighted knowledge commodification *by producers* (Benders and van Veen, 2001; Heusinkveld and Benders, 2005; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2001) and the effects of such commodification *on consumers* (Adcroft and Willis, 2005; Webb, 1999; Willis, 1991), the contribution of intermediaries to knowledge commodification has received far less attention. Importantly, the form of commodification that procurement undertakes is shown to be qualitatively different to that initiated by producers in that it aims to decrease, rather than increase, the exchange-value (i.e. price) of management knowledge.

Second, we show how commodification by procurers is resisted by both the consultants that they engage, and the managers that they ostensibly represent. This occurs not only because of the deleterious effect upon consulting profit margins, but also because procurers, as a function, seek to define the 'management problem' – a territory traditionally the preserve of managers and consultants. This power struggle is important and unusual because studies of knowledge commodification generally represent struggles as contestations either *between* competing producers (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006;

Suddaby and Greenwood, 2001), or by different actors *within* the same producer (Heusinkveld and Benders, 2005).

Third, our study clarifies and extends extant theories of commodification. Current conceptualizations of knowledge commodification propose that the processes of translation, abstraction, and codification produce knowledge commodities (Abrahamson, 1996; Fincham, 1995; Heusinkveld and Benders, 2005; Morris, 2001; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2001). We provide a more rigorous and processual model showing how these activities relate. We also demonstrate that existing theories only explain *commensurate* offerings – and do not explain how exchange-values for knowledge are generated – an essential step in the production of a commodity (Marx, 1976; Simmel, 1972). To explain the production of an exchange-value, our model introduces the additional processes of ‘comparison’ and ‘valuation’.

The article begins by illustrating the dominance of producers in accounts of management knowledge and how their agency is often explained through commodification. It then goes on to explain why the focus on management knowledge producers limits our theoretical understanding of commodification. After outlining the empirical context and research design, we present our findings, which reveal first how procurers as important intermediaries commodify consulting knowledge, and second, the tensions this generates with both client managers and consultants. In the subsequent analysis, we suggest changes to existing commodification theory and highlight the consequences of intermediaries to our understanding of management knowledge more generally.

## COMMODIFICATION OF MANAGEMENT KNOWLEDGE: THE DOMINANCE OF PRODUCERS

### Knowledge Commodification

Commodification is the process by which an entity ‘comes to be provided through, and/or represented in terms of, a market transaction’ (Carvalho and Rodrigues, 2008); in other words, it achieves an ‘exchange value’ (Kopytoff, 1986). Given the growth in knowledge intensive firms (Alvesson, 2001), it is perhaps unsurprising that the commodification of management knowledge and its possible impact on management and organizational practice has received increasing attention (Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall, 2002). As archetypal producers of management knowledge, management consultancies have been a common focus of analysis within these studies. In some of this literature, commodification is used to explain how producers develop certain business models such as licensing (Hansen et al., 1999; Morris, 2001) or high leverage forms of organization (Ernst and Kieser, 2002). Other analyses explain how commodities generate images of security for client managers (Fincham, 1999; Visscher, 2001; Werr et al., 1997), making consulting knowledge easier to sell (Abrahamson, 1996; Fincham, 1995; Huczynski, 1993; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2001). A further theme explores how commodification creates a life-cycle of client demand by which old management commodities are replaced with newer versions (Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999; Huczynski, 1993). In terms of theory, the most developed account of the commodification of management knowledge is found in Suddaby and Greenwood’s (2001) study of ‘Big Five’ professional service

firms. This again represents commodification as offering producers a strategic advantage, in their case by allowing auditing knowledge to be more easily leveraged and sold and thus facilitating the 'colonization' of adjacent knowledge territories, such as consulting.

Prior literature provides important insights into how knowledge commodification occurs. Three central contributory processes can be identified (e.g. Abrahamson, 1996; Huczynski, 1993; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2001). The first concerns knowledge *codification* (Morris, 2001; Werr and Stjernberg, 2003). This entails 'converting individual experience into something that can be stored, moved and reused' (Suddaby and Greenwood, 2001, p. 938; see also Morris, 2001; Werr et al., 1997). For instance, in the case of management consultancies this might involve inscribing knowledge in documents, presentations, or websites. The second process concerns *abstraction*, converting management knowledge into a more generic level, thus making it more easily moved to, and recognized/accepted in a wider variety of different contexts. This not only includes a stress on universal applicability (Kieser, 1997; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2001), but also refers to rendering knowledge more open to interpretation (Benders and van Veen, 2001; Fincham, 1995). Finally, the literature highlights how commodification also comprises processes of *translation*, that is, the interpretation and reapplication of codified and abstracted knowledge in relation to a specific local context (Ansari et al., 2010; Benders and van Veen, 2001; Morris, 2001; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2001; Werr and Stjernberg, 2003; Werr et al., 1997).

However, the attention that knowledge commodification has received in the literature appears limited in two key respects. First, studies generally assume that commodification is beneficial for the knowledge producer. For example, Suddaby and Greenwood (2001) define commodification as 'the process by which managerial knowledge is abstracted from context and reduced to a transparent and generic format *that can be more easily leveraged within PSFs and sold in the market place*' (2001, p. 934, emphasis added). This emphasis on the role of producers has focused attention on the processes which *enhance* exchange value by maximizing the price of knowledge (see also Heusinkveld and Benders, 2005). However, this ignores the possibility that commodification by different agents such as clients or intermediaries might have different effects.

The second, and related, limitation of existing literature is that although some consideration has been given to the agency of consumers and intermediaries (Benders and van Veen, 2001; Fosstenlökken et al., 2003; Heusinkveld et al., 2009), power struggles and contestation over commodification are primarily represented as battles between different producers (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2001) or by agents within the same producer (Heusinkveld and Benders, 2005). This reinforces the view that 'the production of the commodity disempowers the consumer' (Kershaw, 1999, p. 38), leading to the depiction of non-producers as 'victims' of commodification, rather than potentially proactive agents in the process. This emphasis conflicts with studies that depict management knowledge as a 'collective social product' (Clark and Greatbatch, 2004, p. 410) that is shaped in the interaction between a network of different constituencies such as internal actors (Anand et al., 2007; Heusinkveld and Benders, 2005), clients (Clark and Salaman, 1998; Reihlen and Nikolova, 2010; Sturdy, 1997), and other agents (Nicolai et al., 2010; Rüling, 2005).

These are important shortcomings, first because knowledge commodification has a critical effect on the activities and profitability of a variety of businesses and economies (Di Maria et al., 2012), and second because a better understanding of what happens to knowledge when it passes between organizations can help analysts understand the potential of that knowledge to transform, and be transformed by, different actors. Thus, our overarching research question is, how do intermediaries affect management knowledge? To help answer this question we used an abductive methodology to investigate the role of procurers as intermediaries in cases where management knowledge is 'transferred' from consultants to clients. Before detailing our research method we provide a brief description of the research context and its relationship to management knowledge.

### **The Procurement of Management Knowledge**

Whilst studies of producers, and to a lesser extent, consumers, of management knowledge are well established (e.g. Huczynski, 1993; Jackson, 2001; Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall, 2002), the role of intermediaries, who source and broker management knowledge, is relatively under researched (Scarbrough, 2002; Sturdy and Wright, 2011). In the context of management consultancy, which occupies a prime position in studies of knowledge production (Heusinkveld and Benders, 2005; Heusinkveld et al., 2009), procurement, the function that selects and contracts consultants on behalf of client managers, is often the main intermediary between consultants and the end client (Engwall and Eriksson, 2005; Furlong et al., 1994). However, despite the increased use of procurement for sourcing management knowledge (O'Mahoney, 2010), studies of its impact on that knowledge are surprisingly rare. For example, in the recent 550-page *Oxford Handbook of Management Consulting* (Kipping and Clark, 2012), procurement is mentioned only five times, all of these in passing.

Consideration of the impact of procurement on management knowledge is important because it influences the traditionally direct and often high-trust relationship between the client manager and the consultant (Bäcklund and Werr, 2005). Compared to the traditional model of knowledge purchasing (Figure 1), where the client manager is solely responsible for the identification, selection, negotiation, and reporting of consulting projects, the procurement model takes on, adds to, and formalizes, many of these activities (O'Mahoney, 2010).

Whilst there are variations in how procurement is practiced, a common high-level model is procurement specialists working with client managers to define the project requirements and draw up a Request for Proposal (RFI) (sometimes called an Invitation to Tender – ITT) which they then distribute to a number of consultancies. Frequently, the distribution is limited to a Preferred Supplier List (PSL): those consultancies which already meet certain criteria and have signed up to a set of generic terms and conditions, known as a Framework Agreement (Bower, 2003). Subsequently, procurement will then short-list, select, negotiate, and (with the help of the legal department) contract with the preferred consultancies. Finally, procurement sometimes acts as a quality monitoring function, using feedback on the consultancy's performance to inform future purchasing decisions or remove badly performing consultancies from the PSL (Dimitri et al., 2006).

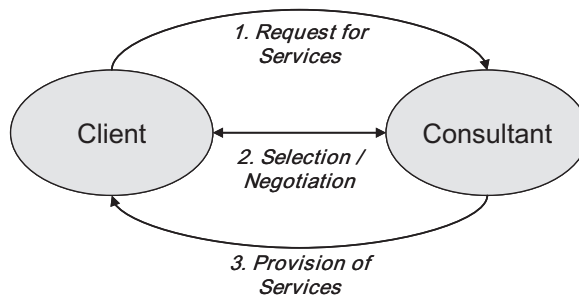
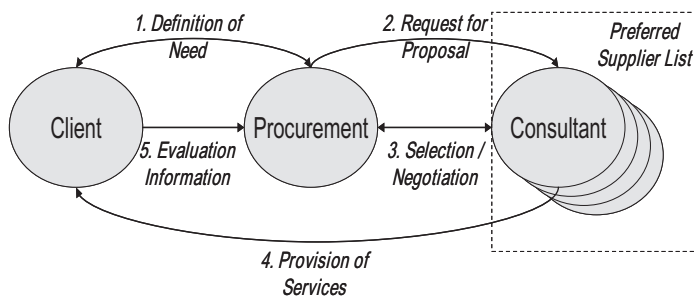
**(a) Traditional Engagement Process****(b) Procurement-led Engagement Process**

Figure 1. Traditional and procurement-led consultant–client engagement process. (a) Traditional engagement process. (b) Procurement-led engagement process

The growth of procurement for consulting knowledge has been driven primarily by two forces (Kennedy Information, 2011). The first is the legal requirement, specified in many countries during the 1980s and 1990s, for the public sector to use procurement for all purchases over a minimum threshold, and thus claim greater accountability and transparency. The second is an attempt in the private sector to control the costs of consultancy by emulating public sector procurement policy (Werr and Perner, 2007). Today, there is still considerable variation between procurement functions in different sectors. In the public sector, procurement is governed by a series of laws that enforce the use of procurement and prohibit some activities such as communication between the client manager and the consultants. In the private sector, policies vary and managers often use procurement at their own discretion (Lindberg and Furusten, 2005). There is also variation in the structure of procurement departments (devolved versus centralized), their reporting (a stand-alone function versus part of the client team), and the extent to which the client manager is mandated to use them.

The growth in use of procurement for buying consultancy knowledge means that its impact is increasingly felt in many areas, including the relationship between consultants and clients (Kennedy Information, 2011; Werr and Perner, 2007). However, while the role of the procurement function has been studied at a generic level, for example in



buying physical supplies (Smeltzer and Ogden, 2002), 'considerably less is known . . . about the emerging practices of purchasing management consultants and the involvement of purchasing professionals in these practices' (Werr and Perner, 2007, p. 99). When procurement is studied, it is frequently framed as 'a rational, sequential process that follows established purchasing procedures', recognizing and satisfying the needs of the client manager (Werr and Perner, 2007, p. 99) and leading to more effective use of consultants, lower costs, and greater accountability (Baker and Faulkner, 1991; Schiele, 2005). Yet, there is evidence that such results are not universal. For example, in the public sector, where the use of procurement is more common than the private sector, criticisms are frequently made by academics (Saint-Martin, 2000), journalists (Craig and Brooks, 2006), and government watchdogs (National Audit Office, 2006) of buyers' failure to achieve these objectives. A deeper study of the impact of procurement and their interactions with consultants and client managers potentially offers greater clarity about the impact of these intermediaries upon management knowledge in consultant–client interactions, and the implications for current theorizations of that knowledge.

## RESEARCH METHODS

### Design and Data Collection

The research design sought to address the question 'how does procurement affect management knowledge when purchasing consultancy services?'. To answer this question we employed a qualitative, grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1994; Suddaby, 2006). Later, we narrowed this focus to examine more closely the way procurement commodifies management knowledge and analysed these findings abductively (Van Maanen et al., 2007), in relation to the theory of knowledge commodification outlined above (Suddaby and Greenwood, 2001).

Our research involved two concurrent activities. First, in seeking to gain a processual understanding of knowledge transfer in consultancy–procurement interactions, we undertook two longitudinal case studies of consultancy procurement over a 12-month period (Table I). The first case study focused on a UK university (UniOrg) that was seeking to restructure its senior management into a 'more efficient decision-making team' (quote from client documents), and had engaged a consultancy to devise a change management and communications plan to support this transition. The second case was a private-sector energy utility (EnergyCo) that engaged a consultancy to develop its middle management through leadership training and coaching.

In both of the cases we used interviews and a range of documentary and observational data (Table I). The interviewees in the two cases numbered six and eight respectively, and were interviewed twice. In both consultancies, this involved the consultants who wrote, amended, and sold the proposals. In EnergyCo, a further consultant was interviewed who contributed to the sales literature. From the client side, interviewees were the client budget holder, the client senior manager, and, in one case, a secondee to the project. In the procurement department, the majority of work was done by one or two procurement staff who were interviewed in both cases.

Six months after the initial analysis, a second round of focused interviews was conducted with each respondent to explore developments in the project. In addition to

Table I. Overview of research data

<i>Informant group</i>	<i>Client</i>	<i>Consultancy</i>	<i>Procurers</i>
<i>Case study 1: 'UniOrg'</i> Informants level (n = 6, interviewed twice)	Director (n = 1) Manager (n = 1) Operations (na) Higher education (5,500)	Partner (n = 1) Senior Consultant (n = 1) Consultant (n = 1) Project/program mgt & IT development (Large)	Procurement Director (n = 0) Procurement Manager (n = 1) Procurement (n = 0) Centralized compulsory purchasing for deals over £10,000 (12)
Sector/specialism and size (in FTE) Research artefacts	Consultancy publicity materials; meeting observations; RFI document; tender document; conversations and emails, contracts (draft and final); scoring criteria Aim: Devising a strategy and change management plan for the university Top Management Team. Creating a communications strategy and plan. Duration: 74 person days spread over 4 months. Costs: £67,000		
<i>Case study 2: 'EnergyCo'</i> Informants level (n = 8, interviewed twice)	Director (n = 1) Manager (na) Operations (n = 1) Utilities (4,500)	Partner (n = 1) Senior Consultant (n = 1) Consultant (n = 2) Leadership training & organizational change (medium sized)	Procurement Director (na) Procurement Manager (n = 2) Procurement (na) UK purchasing with head office in European country (33) Compulsory use of procurement on €75k+ projects
Sector/specialism and size (in FTE) Research artefacts	Consultancy publicity materials; meeting observations; RFI document; scoring criteria, selection of emails between procurer and client; tender document; conversations and emails; contract. E-procurement site. Aim: Providing leadership training to 50 middle managers, plus one-to-one coaching sessions. Duration: 52 person-days spread over 6 months. Costs: £52,000		
<i>Interview study</i> Informants level (n = 48)	Director (n = 2) Manager (n = 7) Operations (n = 1) 1. Telecom (6,500) 2. Public health (11,000) 3. Manufacturing (2,500) 4. IT (100,000) 5. Rail operator (7,500) 6. Local gov. (19,000) 7. University (7,500) 8. Oil industry (90,000)	Partner (n = 8) Senior Consultant (n = 9) Consultant (n = 8) 1. Strategy & change (11,000) 2. Outsourcing & IT (250,000) 3. Niche training (15) 4. Generalist (250,000) 5. Org. development (5) 6. Change mgt (450) 7. BPR & outsourcing (2,000) 8. Leadership (1)	Procurement Director (n = 4) Procurement Manager (n = 8) Procurement (n = 1) 1. Multi-site (200) 2. Centralized function (120) 3. Centralized function (40) 4. Multi-site (200) 5. Partly centralized (35) 6. Partly centralized (18) 7. Multi-site (300) 8. Outsourcing (95) 9. Outsourcing (12)
Sector/specialism and size (in FTE)			



interviews we also analysed consultancy publicity and sales materials, case studies, RFI and requirements documentation, scoring criteria used to select consultancies, and the final contract (see Table I). In both cases, winning proposals were reviewed and two or three meetings between client managers and procurers were observed in each case. Notes were taken about these activities and helped in understanding changes that were taking place to the structure and form of consulting knowledge during the procurement process.

The second form of data collection involved 48 exploratory interviews undertaken with stakeholders from 12 different organizations over a 12-month period (Table I). These aimed at providing a more general view of knowledge transfer in consultancy projects under procurement and included interviewees from eight client organizations (where managers and procurers were interviewed), eight consultancies, and two specialist 'outsourced' procurement organizations. As procurement is often varied in practice, especially between private and public sectors (Erridge et al., 2001), organizations were selected to represent a range of different sectors and projects. By maximizing variation we sought to obtain a richer view of the elements that influenced the procurement process (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

The size and structure of procurement differed by organizational size, sector, and strategy (Table I) and ranged from highly devolved purchasing which was not 'counted' as procurement, through to large centralized procurement departments, and then to multinational organizations which had regional procurement departments. Those procurers that dealt with consultants accounted for 5–15 per cent of the department headcount. In some private sector companies, procurement acted more as a support function to management when the latter deigned to involve them, whilst in the public sector, it was often impossible to spend more than £10,000 on consultants without procurement becoming involved. The two outsourced companies we studied were part of a small but growing number of companies that perform procurement for clients who do not have the resource or expertise to undertake the function internally. In addition, 19 interviews were conducted with members of professional organizations, industry representatives, and expert commentators to provide a broader context on the procurement of consulting services. Several meetings of these networks were also observed (see Table II).

Interviews lasted between 35 and 85 minutes, and were recorded and transcribed. Early interviews were semi-structured, focusing upon the experience of interviewees with the procurement process: what happened and why? As the analysis of these early interviews uncovered themes that appeared interesting, our questions narrowed in focus.

## **Data Analysis**

Our data analysis involved both inductive and abductive steps (Table III).

We first used the data from the case studies to create a timeline which established the sequence of events within each case, with a focus on how the consultancy offering changed as it was amended by consultants, written as a proposal, and processed by procurement. On this timeline we also noted changes in the form or content of management knowledge with the activity of each actor. For example, a consultant might enter a short description of the project into a procurement website, or a procurer might

Table II. Expert interviews

<i>Organization</i>	<i>Role</i>	<i>Interviews/ meetings observed</i>
Management Consultancies Association (MCA)	The representative body for the consulting industry in the UK	3/1
Chartered Institute of Purchasing and Supply (CIPS)	The professional association for the procurement industry	4/0
Institute of Business Consulting (IBC)	The professional association for management consultants	4/3
Office of Government Commerce (OGC)	The UK government department responsible for best practice in procurement	2/0
Chartered Management Institute (CMI)	The professional association for managers	2/1
Other	Interviews undertaken with journalists, academics, and other analysts on the changing nature of consulting	4/0

change a title ‘senior consultant’ to ‘consultant’. Next, we undertook a process of open coding in which the timelines, the interview transcripts, and associated documentation were examined and annotated to identify emergent codes related to the transformation of knowledge. This initial process of coding resulted in over 60 descriptive coding concepts.

After the coding, we identified second-order explanatory themes and iteratively matched these against existing theories of knowledge through the process of abduction (Table III). Abduction assumes prior theoretical knowledge and an iterative process by which empirical data is induced into codes and the coding is compared to existing theories (Ketokivi and Mantere, 2010; Suddaby, 2006). Through this, the process of translation, codification, and abstraction espoused by Suddaby and Greenwood (2001) and others (Fincham, 1995; Morris, 2001; Werr and Stjernberg, 2003; Werr et al., 1997) resonated with our own findings, but required clarification and development. Comparison between our emerging framework and extant commodification theory allowed us to introduce additionally the second-order themes of comparison and valuation. A final theme addressed the question of how consultants and client managers deployed tactics to resist the agency of procurement.

## THE PROCESSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF COMMODIFICATION

In the sections that follow we first provide a brief outline of the cases to show how management knowledge was impacted by procurement over time. We then focus on six key themes that emerged from our data analysis. The first three, codification, abstraction, and codification, occurred simultaneously; the fourth and fifth, comparison and valuation, occurred subsequently; and the sixth, tactics and tensions, occurred throughout the project.

Table III. The inductive-abductive process of analysis

Activity: induction	Time-lining of case study data Open-coding of <i>all</i> data to identify types of activities undertaken by procurement, consultants and clients during tendering and contracting process				
Result: first-order descriptive coding (example codes)	Problem identification, prioritization, decision making, formalization, tensions with procurement, resolutions with procurement, defining scoring criteria, scoring activities, borrowing/copying knowledge, managing the RFQ				
Activity: induction	Identification of second-order themes describing impact of procurement on knowledge				
Result: second-order themes (all themes)	Rejection, manifestation, comparison, theorization, codification, inscription, modification, translation, negotiation, abstraction				
Activity: abduction	Comparison of second-order themes to existing theories of knowledge (e.g. translation theory, memetics, colonization theory, commodification, institutional theory, diffusion).				
Result: theory selection	Selection of commodification theory as closest match				
Activity: comparison of themes with theory	A. Categorization of second-order themes under Suddaby and Greenwood's definition of commodification (codification, abstraction, translation) (see also Morris, 2001)				
Result: theory development	B. Identification of additional second-order themes (comparison) <table><tr><td><b>Codification:</b> manifestation, inscription, codification, productization</td><td><b>Abstraction:</b> theorization, abstraction</td><td><b>Translation:</b> modification, implementation, translation.</td><td><b>Other:</b> comparison, valuation &amp; tactics of resistance</td></tr></table>	<b>Codification:</b> manifestation, inscription, codification, productization	<b>Abstraction:</b> theorization, abstraction	<b>Translation:</b> modification, implementation, translation.	<b>Other:</b> comparison, valuation & tactics of resistance
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## The Cases: Exploring Procurement Processes

*UniOrg.* Through a series of mergers, UniOrg had grown significantly in size over the previous decade, leading to a perception that the Top Management Team (TMT) had become ‘slow, cumbersome and embarrassingly archaic’. The proposed restructure had been talked about for several years, but it was only following the recruitment of a new pro-Vice Chancellor (PVC) that the use of external consultants was proposed. After a year’s worth of TMT meetings, the PVC drafted a project to recruit a consultancy to redesign the TMT structure and decision-making and devise a communications strategy to support the restructure. This project specification was emailed to the university central procurement office which passed it to a procurement manager who specialized in ‘professional services’.

The procurement manager, in turn, drafted an RFI using a standard template for the procurement of professional services. In this document, the background to the project was detailed, followed by a list of requirements, concerning the outcome of the project (‘the communication strategy and plan will . . . identify key stakeholders, the message, medium and timing of communication . . . it should not exceed forty pages’), as well as the process that the consultancy should follow (‘all members of the TMT will be interviewed . . .’). The document also specified the details of how consultancies should respond to the RFI by providing a template with specific headings, such as ‘plan [not exceeding 4 months]’ and ‘CVs of all consultants’. As the procurement manager commented:

Writing requirements is a balance. You want to keep them quite generic, so you don’t over-specify . . . meaning some good consultancies won’t bid. But at the same time you want their responses to be fairly similar so you can compare like with like.

The procurement function in UniOrg sent the RFI to 11 consultancies on their ‘Preferred Supplier List’. As a Partner at the winning consultancy told me:

. . . you have to get on that [PSL] list before you get a sniff of [an RFI], but to do that, you’ve got to sign-up, beforehand, to a load of terms and conditions: what your terminology will be, what liability you have, what reviews you will have, what you will charge, how you will be billed.

This process ensured that consultancies defined their roles (e.g. ‘senior consultant’) in a similar way, had liability insurance, and had been in existence for at least three years.

Eight consultancies responded to the RFI with a proposal. A partner at the winning consultancy described the process:

With something like this, especially from the public sector, you know they don’t want the bells and whistles. We’d got five services that may have been of use to them, but they wanted something very tightly defined so we’d have to have cut out a lot of extras . . . We also have to write in their terms – using their terminology – for example, they don’t want to hear about ‘business processes’ but focus on ‘decision-making’.

The partner also ruled what he perceived as the 'over-defined' nature of the RFI:

Years ago you wouldn't get a proposal like this . . . telling us what they wanted. [Then] consultancies told clients what they wanted and could charge what they wanted . . . [Now] clients tell consultants what they want, how long it will take and what it should cost.

When the proposals were submitted, the Procurement Manager and the PVC scored them under the headings of 'Cost' and 'Quality' (weighted 40:60 respectively) and met to produce a short-list of two consultancies. This review process, which was observed by one of the authors, first involved comparing the pricing and offerings of the different consultancies through a scoring process. This was made considerably easier by the fact that the tight RFI definition resulted in content that was very similar in respect of the knowledge and services offered. The biggest variations were in terms of company factors, such as the CVs of those involved. The process also allowed the reviewers to get a feel for a 'competitive price' for the contract. When the two highest-scoring consultancies were asked to come to the university to present their costs and introduce their consultants, one of the teams was told that they had a strong proposal but an excessive price compared to the other consultancies and were 'given the chance to revalue [their] proposition' by the procurement manager. Their revised proposal, which cut their total costs by 15 per cent, was eventually selected and passed to 'Legal' as the basis for a contract.

The contract presented another opportunity to specify in detail what the consultancy had to deliver and at what cost. The Partner at the consultancy commented: 'they really tie you down now . . . When I started, it was the norm for the consultancy to write the contract . . . you always leave some 'wiggle room' for extras, new ideas and innovation . . . not any more'. As expected, the contract provided further details for the consultancy to adhere to, not only in terms of the process and deliverables, but also the fees that would be withheld if the contract was broken.

In the UniOrg case, the focus on cost and the detailed specification provided by the client encouraged consultancies to break up their packaged services and select the parts which best suited the client's needs. These were then further pared down and, in some cases, moulded in both semantics and format to fit with the client's terms. This allowed the client to easily compare consultancy offerings. The final stages enabled the knowledge offerings to be tied down into a legal framework that was defined primarily on the terms of the client.

*EnergyCo.* At EnergyCo, a director's request for external leadership training for his team, resulted in the involvement of procurement as the estimated spend exceeded the company requirement of £40,000 for compulsory use of procurement. The aim of the procurement managers in their initial meeting was to 'specify' the project requirements because:

There is often an internal language which makes little sense to consultants . . . Or the manager thinks they want X when really Y will do. (Procurement Manager A)

The director involved was new to the company and disliked the use of procurement, stating, ‘... in my last place, this type of spend was left to me ... I’m the best judge of what [my department] needs ... what do [procurement] know?’. As in UniOrg, the procurers were keen to limit the discretion of consultancies in offering their own standardized packages:

We’ve got nothing against standardization, but it’s got to be on our terms ... if you give consultancies free rein they’ll [sell] you all manner of stuff you don’t want ... so you have to tie them down.

At EnergyCo, the production of the RFI was especially powerful because it used an on-line form to specify in detail the headings that must be completed by the bidding firms and also the word count and other constraints. For example, it was not possible for the form to be submitted unless the consultant coaches had ticked a box beside their names that indicated that they ‘had accreditation or certification in coaching’. Other boxes, for example, specified the experience and qualifications required by the trainers (‘5 years, minimum postgraduate qualification’), and required this to be confirmed before the form could be submitted electronically. The winning consultancy found such sites problematic:

This turns all our hard work ... skills ... into a check-list ... a box. We’ve got people who would be ideal for this work but because they’re not SHL accredited, we can’t use them ... we’ve got [an internet product] that might well save them money to achieve the same thing ... [but] we can’t tell them about it because there is no box to write about it ... there’s no discussion ... just ‘we know best’. (Senior Consultant)

However, the consultancy still submitted its bid:

Even though you can’t sell a whole service, we have knowledge and experience in this arena ... you’re competing a lot on price, so you have to leave some things out ... you translate what you have into what they need.

The shift in the content and language of leadership training after the procurement process is evident in a comparison between details taken from the (eventual winning) consultancy’s website/marketing material and the details on the e-procurement form (Table IV).

The procurement manager and the director scored the proposals that were received according to a number of criteria ranging from the CVs of the trainers, to the quality of the facilities and the costs, and invited three consultancies in for interviews. Prior to the interviews, the information garnered by the first round of proposals allowed the reviewers to specify more precisely what they were looking for, so that the eventual presentations were all but identical. After selecting their preferred supplier (based largely on cost), the contract was formalized with legal, and, after a couple of reviews, signed off. The contract specified details such as the duration, location, and performance metrics of training. However, even after signing the contract the client manager was still frustrated



Table IV. EnergyCo case study: before and after the procurement process

	<i>Consultancy materials</i>	<i>Procurement form</i>
Needs assessment	'We will provide a systematic audit of your leadership practices and, with you, develop a training needs strategy to benchmark against best practice'	No mention of needs assessment. In interview: 'we do this ourselves'
Content	'Typical engagements include . . . training needs analysis . . . program development . . . participant skills survey . . . on-line tutorials . . . leadership development . . . leadership exercises and cases'	'Five 3 hour tutorials for fifteen participants . . . three one-to-one coaching sessions lasting 45 mins'
Ongoing support	'Provides an ongoing learning support environment for continuous professional development . . . comprises an on-line discussion forum and reflexive portfolio . . .'	'No support is required after the programme has been delivered'
Feedback	'We have a bespoke on-line interactive system for client feedback which enables anonymized and constructive data to be collected and disseminated . . .'	'Standard [Company] forms will be used to collect feedback from participants'

with procurement, stating, 'it's such a long, bureaucratic process . . . next time, I just don't think I'll bother'.

### Themes of Knowledge Commodification

The case studies highlighted a number of themes that are developed below in conjunction with our interview data. In addition to issues of codification, abstraction, and translation, we also found that issues of 'comparison and valuation' and 'tactics of resistance' were also central to the commodification process.

*Codification.* In our cases, codification provided procurement with an important method for effecting the commodification of consultancy work. This concerned not only the inscription of knowledge, but also defining the structure of that inscription. Central to this process was the production of documents (electronic or physical) which defined and structured the project, specifically the PSL, RFI, the Proposal, Assessment Criteria, and Contract (see Table V).

Interviewees stressed how consultancies had to agree to a number of conditions in order to get onto the preferred supplier list. These conditions not only ensured minimum standards of insurance and financial soundness, but also made the comparison of proposals easier through consistent terminology. For example, one procurer specified that 'everyone called a "Senior Consultant" should have a minimum of five years' consulting experience, a professional membership, and a post-graduate qualification' (Procurement Manager, Client 2).

Table V. Codification in the procurement process

<i>Codification</i>	<i>Responsibility</i>	<i>Purpose</i>
PSL	Procurement	A short-list of consultancies held by procurement that had met minimum requirements and signed up to common terms and conditions
RFI	Procurement/Client Manager	Details the project requirements. Generally involves procurement inscribing and clarifying the project needs from the client manager or director
Proposal	Consultancy	Explains how the consultancy will meet these requirements. Often in a format specified by procurement
Presentation	Consultancy	Occasionally used to introduce the proposal in face-to-face meetings
Assessment Criteria	Procurement/Client Manager	Details how proposals will be scored and selected
Contract	Procurement/Legal	Legal obligations of the client and consultant

To take another document, within the RFI the procurer had the ability to specify both the structure of the proposal that consultancies would produce and the project itself, thereby forcing consultancies not only to change their projects to fit the requirements of procurement, but also to ensure that their services were presented as comparable. One procurer spelled out the advantage this provided:

... [previously] too many managers recruited consultants on the basis of what was said ... In a one-to-one meeting the proposal can seem pretty unique [such that] no-one else can offer it ... when you force consultants to write this down in the way you want, it becomes a tool that you can use to say to other consultancies 'can you do this too?' (Procurer, Client 5)

The ability to enforce codification of both managerial requirements (via the RFI) and consultancy proposals (by specifying their terminology, structure, and involvement) generated entities over which procurers could claim property rights. When asked about the documents in the procurement database, the procurer in Client 6 stressed 'these [documents] are ours. They have information from [managers] and consultants, but they belong to us ... this gives us control'.

*Translation.* Codification as detailed above also necessitated translation. In our cases, where knowledge was inscribed in the RFI, the proposal, or the contract, it was transformed to make it more consistent, comparable and, for procurement, more controllable. PSLs, RFIs, and contracts, for example, were accompanied by a glossary, which defined terms such as 'senior consultant', 'quality assurance', or 'professional', or specified the details of processes such as 'payment'. The requirements, for example, which provided the backbone of the RFI, were procurement's translation of the needs of the project, and

were generally seen as the responsibility of, and thus owned by, procurement rather than the client manager.

In interviews, procurement frequently depicted themselves as translating between the client manager and the consultant because 'the two speak different languages' (Procurement Director, Client 8). Interestingly, this view was not always shared by consultants, with one partner stating that 'communication with procurement is a bit of an art form'. Procurers not only translated, but also forced consultants to translate. In producing a proposal, several consultants revealed their irritation in complying with the demands of procurement. It was common for example, for consultants to state that they provided 'much more than . . . training' or that their services were 'better than just re-engineering' and complained that the procurement process forced them to describe their wares in a way '[which] simplifies what we can really do'. The effects of translation not only irritated consultants, but also, the client manager. In the public sector, where the process was often more formal, managers complained that 'by the time [procurement] have done their thing . . . you don't recognize the project' (Procurement Manager, Client 2).

*Abstraction.* One of the most common complaints about procurement from consultants was the former's ability to transform what were perceived as unique consultancy services into what one consultant called a 'bland lowest common denominator'. Procurement achieved this through the two processes already described, as well as by transforming consulting services into highly comparable entities through the process of abstraction. For example, a procurement manager (Client 7) detailed the thinking behind this effort:

You try to make their responses [in the proposal] . . . non-specific . . . because if you don't, you can't compare them . . . sometimes this means you are forcing them to use certain terms . . . getting them to redefine their work.

This manager told us of a director who instructed procurement that he wanted a 'Six Sigma' project, but this was rewritten as 'process re-engineering' to ensure that more consultancies might apply, as Six Sigma is a proprietary method but process re-engineering is not.

A process which supported this effort was the tendency of procurers to focus on price. Although in interviews many procurers denied they focused on cost-reduction, in the RFIs it was common to read phrases such as 'cost will account for 50 per cent of the evaluation'. Such a focus placed pressure on consultancies to cut costs by removing what one procurer called 'bells and whistles' and what a consultant called 'our unique and innovative offering'. Instead, consultants were expected to focus on the basic 'deliverable' that could more easily be compared with other providers. For example, one procurer (Client 2) outlined how a manager had been sent PR material by a consultant friend that detailed a methodology called 'Elite', claiming headcount reductions in dozens of companies and improved performance. Despite the supposed uniqueness of this offering, it wasn't until the manager contacted procurement to 'buy in the method', that the procurer realized it was simply a form of Total Quality Management (TQM). It was, therefore, the language of quality improvement that eventually drove the RFI rather than the original requirements from the client manager. As the procurer stated:

It is procurement's job to find out what type of service it is . . . to make it as generic as possible so to [maximize] the bidders.

Thus by removing what one consultant called the 'bells and whistles', transforming unique terms into a common language, constraining the content and structure of proposals and codifying the results, procurers forced consultancies to create commensurable offerings (i.e. ones that could be compared on the same scale). Yet, this in itself was not the end of the process. Before a price could be ascribed to the offering, processes of comparison and valuation needed to be considered.

*Comparison and valuation.* Whilst codification, translation, and abstraction rendered consultancy offerings commensurate – this did not create an exchange value for them. In our interviews and cases, procurers were very aware of the exchange-value achieved for consulting knowledge, because to a great extent procurement 'justify their very existence by [their] ability to cut purchasing costs' (Procurement Manager, Case 5). Moreover, a low price was perceived to be dependent on two factors. First, procurement needed to create commensurate services. As one procurement director (Case 6) noted, 'If you are comparing apples and pears, you have no leverage to negotiate a good price'. However, the second factor in reducing price was the comparison process. This concerned both the number of consultancies that were left 'in the ring' once the scoring process had been completed, and the ability of the procurer to use the information they had received to renegotiate a better price:

If you have a lot of consultancies bidding for a standardized piece of work you can pay virtually nothing for it . . . if you only end up comparing one consultancy to itself, you're not in a strong negotiating position. (Procurement Manager, Client 6)

A useful tactic for procurers in the comparison process was to have a two stage RFI. This involved a 'first round' where the responses to the first RFI were used to provide cost pressures on a tighter, second-round document (often known as the RFP – Request for Proposal) sent to a short-list of the consultancies. Often procurers would aim to be left with a 'short, short-list' of two or three consultancies so they could play them off against each other to generate the cheapest offering and to have a back-up in case the preferred supplier became too demanding.

However, comparing the knowledge offerings and prices of different consultancies only rarely generated the final price paid. In many cases, a further process of valuation sought to negotiate down the pricing of the preferred supplier. This occurred for a variety of reasons. Amongst outsourced procurers, this additional process of valuation sought to generate as low a price as possible, at other times a senior manager or director might suggest that the price was 'too high for what we were getting'. This valuation process was iterative, in some cases the consultancy would push back and state that this was 'their final price' or offer to meet procurement halfway. The ability of the client to negotiate was, in turn, partly dependent on the number and quality of alternative offerings that they were comparing. Thus, it was the combination of translation, codification and

abstraction, comparison and valuation which generated a knowledge commodity with a value ascribed to it. Table VI provides a summary of how these different processes take place at different stages of the project.

*Tactics and tensions.* The threat of commodification was one which consultants and their professional associations identified as an explicit strategic threat to their profit margins. In an industry meeting observed by one of the authors, a leading representative led a discussion seeking to identify strategies to 'avoid commodification'. Yet, even behind closed doors, the scepticism of consultants about the procurement function was not solely linked to questions of profit. Consultants also focused on whether or not procurement were the best people to be identifying the solutions to client problems:

I don't have a problem with value . . . I ask, 'are procurers qualified to define business solutions?' . . . I have worked in over thirty companies, I know best practice . . . read thought leadership . . . can be considered an expert. Can a procurement manager say that? (Consultancy Partner, Case 9)

This critique was also shared by several client managers that were interviewed:

[I] know the needs of my department, what the people are like and what the right consultancy should be like . . . It's not something you can put in a spreadsheet . . . so I don't get why I'm not more involved in choosing them. (Client Manager, Client 5)

. . . if you're not competent enough to decide when external help is needed, then why do they call you a manager? (Client Manager, Client 2)

A consequence of this dual indignation was that consultants and managers deployed a number of tactics to minimize the perceived encroachment of procurement upon 'their' turf (see Table VII). One category of tactics involved avoiding the rules that forced work to go through procurement. For example, many firms detailed a financial threshold above which work must go through procurement (often £50,000). Several interviewees detailed examples of how projects above this threshold could be broken down into smaller entities to avoid this rule. Another response was to define a project as an 'extension' to an existing project rather than a new project.

Some tactics involved the collaboration of client managers and consultants. For example, a client director occasionally asked his preferred consultancy to define the requirements so that they were more likely to get the work (in one case, by detailing a specific type of accreditation combined with a particular form of solution). Other tactics were more direct, for example private sector client directors might simply refuse to go through procurement and hire consultants directly or berate a procurer until he or she chose the manager's preferred supplier. The extent to which a manager could 'get away' with this depended on their seniority. As a director in Client 1 asked, 'who's going to sack me over that?'.

Table VI. The commodifying effect of procurement at project stages

	<i>Pre-engagement</i>	<i>Project definition</i>	<i>Proposal writing</i>	<i>Consultancy selection</i>	<i>Negotiation &amp; contracting</i>
Translation	NA	Translation managerial needs into 'procurement speak'	Forcing consultancies to use procurement terminology when submitting proposals	NA	NA
Codification	Preferred Supplier List	Project Requirements RFP	Specifying the structure, format and terminology of the proposal	Proposal Scoring Criteria Contract Project Plan	Contract
Abstraction	Developing universal terms and conditions for consultancies to adhere to	Providing generic requirements to maximize targeted consultancies	Ensuring consultancies use non-proprietary, common terminology	NA	NA
Comparison & Valuation	NA	Comparing the different offerings provided by various consultancies	NA	Comparing the consultancies through the scoring criteria	Specifying and negotiating a price through a 'reverse auction'



Table VII. Tactics of resistance to the agency of procurement

<i>Procurement aims</i>	<i>Procurement activities</i>	<i>Dominant processes of commodification</i>	<i>Primary (and secondary) resisters</i>	<i>Tactics in resisting procurement</i>
Project definition	Requirements gathering Writing the RFP	Codification & translation	Client Managers (Consultants)	Breaking up projects below the procurement threshold (often £50k or £100k) Defining extra work as 'extensions' rather than new projects Allowing the preferred consultants to help write the project requirements so that they were more likely to win the bid Flatly refusing to go through procurement: hiring the consultancy and leaving accounts payable to pick up the bill.
Selection	PSL Electronic forms Scoring criteria	Codification, abstraction & translation	Client Managers (Consultants)	Persuading procurement to use the client's preferred consultant (Establishing long-term relationships with client managers to elicit information or favours) (Creating innovative services that are more difficult to commodify)
Negotiation	Scoring criteria Reverse auctioning	Abstraction & comparison	Consultants	Defining a higher starting price knowing that it will be reduced by 10% by procurement Specifying high financial penalties for changes to the contract and/or follow-on work Seeking to extend the duration of the contract with the client manager without going through procurement Refusing to work 'beyond contract' so that the minimum contractual requirements are fulfilled but little else

Procurement were well aware of, and often frustrated by, the tactics of managers and consultants. Many agreed that the question was one of legitimacy as well as profit margins. A senior director at CIPS, the procurement institute, spoke most clearly of their concern:

... at the heart of these [tactics] is not only a question of protecting margins ... It's also about who has the right to define the project. The [client manager] thinks it's him because he knows his problem best. The consultant thinks it's him because he's got an MBA ... the procurer thinks it's him because he can negotiate the best deal.

## DISCUSSION

In analysing the procurement of consultancy knowledge, our study develops existing conceptualizations of the commodification of management knowledge. In particular, we suggest that current explanations of the commodification of management knowledge are at best partial. In the discussion that follows, we propose a two-part model (Table VIII and Figure 2) which corresponds to the first two sections of this discussion. The first stage comprises the processes that have received significant attention in the literature: codification, translation, and abstraction. In our model we further clarify what these terms mean and their relationship to each other. We argue that these three processes produce commensurate, but not commodified knowledge. In the second stage of our model we show how the additional processes of valuation and comparison produce commodified knowledge. In a final section of the discussion, we theorize how both commensuration and commodification are linked to political struggles between consultants, procurers, and client managers.

### Stage One: Codification, Abstraction, and Translation

As outlined in Table VIII and Figure 2, we outline the process of commodification of management knowledge as involving a number of component elements within an overarching model. First, codification in our cases involved both the inscription of knowledge (via RFPs, proposals, and assessment criteria), and a political process by which claims of ownership and control over that knowledge were exerted – as the procurer in Client 6 stated, ‘these [documents] are ours’. Importantly, codification necessitated translation, in that by capturing managerial requirements or writing a proposal, there is a movement from tacit, ambiguous knowledge to something altogether more concrete, which can only be achieved through a shift in meaning. By making knowledge explicit and formal, procurers and consultants changed both the semantics and the meaning of that knowledge. Even where knowledge was re-codified, as with Table V, the different ownership and structure of the new documentation necessitated some translation. However, whether or not codification is strictly necessary to achieve commodified knowledge is unclear. Thus, in our model, the process of codification is subsumed within that of translation, implying that we cannot conceive of codification without some form of translation. Yet, the model does not preclude the opposite; one can for instance conceive of forms of translation where codification is unnecessary. A further point with

Table VIII. (Central) processes of knowledge commodification

<i>Concept</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Effects</i>	<i>Link with other processes</i>	<i>Potential outcomes</i>
Translation	A shift in the semantics and meaning of management knowledge as it moves to a different context	Enables a repurposing of knowledge and facilitates claims of ownership for those doing the translation	A necessary component of both codification and abstraction.	<i>Commensuration</i> Together, these processes generate commensurable outcomes, i.e. knowledge offerings that can be measured on the same scale(s)
Codification	The inscription of knowledge, for example in text or diagrams, either electronically or physically	Produces a tangible and more legitimate manifestation of translated knowledge. Facilitates claims of ownership. Enables replication, sharing and storage	Commonly undertaken in organizations but not theoretically necessary for either translation or abstraction. Useful for commodification	
Abstraction	The transformation of unique, contextually-embedded knowledge into generic, idealized knowledge	Enables a wider and more generic application of knowledge to new contexts. Facilitates commensuration and comparison of various forms of knowledge	Not necessary for codification. Necessary prior to comparison and for commodification	
Comparison	The process by which commensurable knowledge offerings are compared on the same scale(s)	A qualitative or quantitative weighting or scaling of the various use-value of different knowledge offerings	Comparison can only be undertaken once knowledge is commensurate (i.e. they can be compared on the same scale). Thus comparison is dependent upon commensuration which is produced by translation, codification and abstraction	<i>Exchange-value</i> Together, comparison and valuation processes generate a price for a commensurable entity
Valuation	The process by which an exchange value is established through negotiation	This process produces a price for a knowledge offering	An iterative process by which the comparative use-value of knowledge offerings of suppliers are considered	

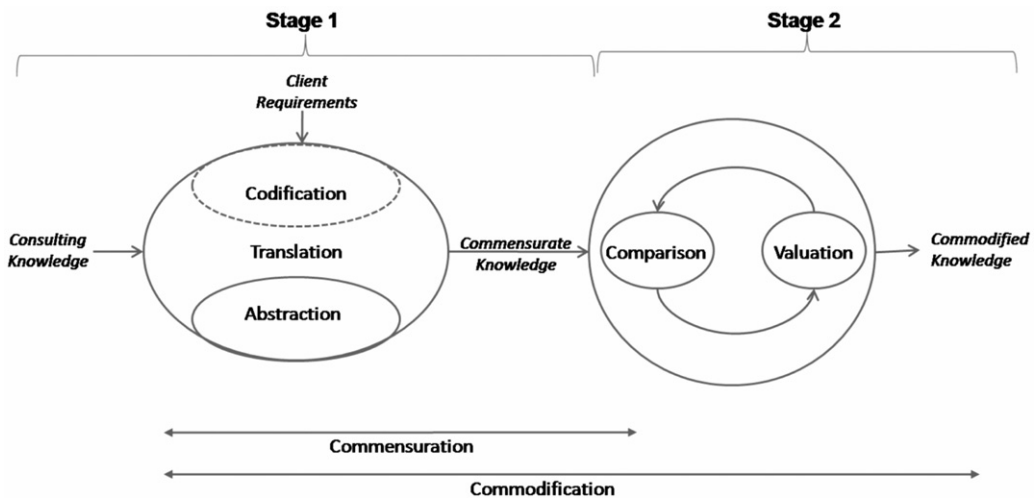


Figure 2. A model of knowledge commodification

codification, is that although all of our examples involved this process, one might consider settings, such as live music, which do not involve codification, but still might be described as commodified, as they possess an exchange value (e.g. a ticket price). For this reason, in our model (Figure 2), codification has a dotted boundary, indicating its potential exclusion from the commodification process.

Second, in terms of abstraction, our findings pointed to the *transformation of unique, contextually-embedded knowledge into generic, idealized knowledge*. This too, had a political purpose in making different knowledge offerings more commensurate, and thus easier to compare and score. Abstraction, therefore, is undertaken before any form of comparison takes place. We would argue also that abstraction necessitates translation – when procurement sought to abstract knowledge offerings, they necessarily changed semantics and meanings; firm-specific terminology was removed, and the language of procurers was adopted over the variants presented by different consultancies. Yet, we would also suggest that translation does not necessitate abstraction. One might conceive of a text such as a legal principle being translated into another context without being made more generic or idealized. Thus, as with codification, the process of abstraction in our model is subsumed within translation, suggesting that all forms of abstraction involve some form of translation, although the opposite is not necessarily the case (Figure 2).

Thus, the co-presence of both codification and abstraction with translation give priority to the latter as *the* central process in the transformation of management knowledge (Figure 2). This resonates with Czarniawska and Sevón's (1996) work which refers to translation as a dynamic process in knowledge transfer, but extends this by explaining that it is primarily the effects of translation on knowledge that enable and signal procurement's power. This agency is not simply one of power but also as others have stressed, creativity; 'the act of translation is very much involved in the creation of knowledge' (Gentzler and Tymoczko, 2002, p. xxi).

However, our earlier definition of commodification, of achieving a market (exchange) value, means that the processes detailed above do not, according to our findings,

generate commodification but instead create commensuration: knowledge that can be compared on the same scale. In our case, this was manifested in the proposal, written by consultants, for assessment by procurement. Whilst the proposal outlines what forms of knowledge will be introduced into the organization and how this might occur, it is not accorded an exchange (market) value and should not be called a 'commodity'.

In the wider sociological literature, commensuration is a process by which disparate entities are bought together on a shared scale or metric. Examples of commensuration 'include votes, standardised test scores, rankings, opinion polls, batting averages and cost-benefit ratios' (Levin and Espeland, 2002, p. 124). Commensuration is important because its practice is imbued with social power. The act of commensuration has the ability to legitimize and institutionalize new epistemic forms:

Commensuration systematically organizes and discards information. It simplifies . . . by reducing how much information we have to pay attention to, and by integrating into one, comprehensive form, information that was originally produced in many different forms. (Levin and Espeland, 2002, p. 125)

Commensuration is necessary but insufficient for commodification to occur, for once entities have been made commensurate, they must then be allocated prices, a process that is not necessary for commensuration in itself (Cerulo, 2002, p. 78).

## Stage Two: Comparison and Valuation

At the end of Stage One, the procurement function has insight into approximately commensurate knowledge offerings, but has not selected a preferred supplier, nor agreed a price for the work. To achieve full commodification our findings show that further processes of comparison and valuation are important (see Table VIII and Figure 2). In procurement, comparison was undertaken to evaluate the relative quality and *proposed* costs of each proposal, primarily by scoring proposals against the marking criteria. The importance of comparison in generating commodities is noted by both Marxist and neo-classical definitions of commodification (Marx, 1976, p. 48; see also Ertman and Williams, 2005; Fourcade, 2011; Kopytoff, 1986; Radin, 1996), but has often been overlooked in studies of management knowledge.

In our model, valuation occurs iteratively with the comparison process. Our findings suggested that the proposed prices of the preferred suppliers were negotiated further by procurement and the outcomes of these negotiations were again compared against other offerings until a price was achieved which satisfied the client and the supplier. However, as Fourcade (2011) argues, the valuation of hard-to-measure phenomena is not simply an objective, logical process, but is embedded in local political and social contexts. One procurer might accept a proposed price because they thought it was 'fair', whilst another might see it as their duty to negotiate the lowest possible cost for the client. Thus, whilst our findings indicated factors such as the numbers of potential suppliers had an impact upon the valuation process, so too did more intangible factors such as company culture or the personality of those involved.

For procurers, then, we would argue that what abstraction, translation, and codification actually produces, is not commodification, but commensuration. Clearly such knowledge has a use-value for the consumer – business process re-engineering (BPR) can produce cost-savings even if given away free – however, exchange value is only achieved, at least in procurement, through the comparison of services in the market and the valuation of the services through negotiations. A procurer has little idea what price they can negotiate for something until they know how many other suppliers are offering a similar service.

The output of this process is commodified knowledge – knowledge that is codified, structured, and priced. As such, it has important systemic potential for feedback both to the supplier, in terms of information concerning realistic pricing and the attractiveness of the knowledge services they sell, and the buyer, in terms of knowledge about the market. Yet it is important also to stress that this commodity is relative only to one specific buyer. Different buyers will have different needs which will result in different forms of codification, translation, and abstraction, leading to different commensurate offerings being compared and a different valuation achieved (cf. Fourcade, 2011).

### **Power Struggles of Commodification**

Beyond developing our understanding of the processes of management knowledge commensuration and commodification, our analysis also highlights how such activities are inherently linked to power struggles. The act of commensuration, detailed in Stage One of our model, reflects and accords power by generating an ostensibly objective, rationalized, and quantified view of the world (Porter, 1996), and also by creating a self-confirming discursive boundary object which integrates and disciplines previously disparate views of the world (D'Agostino, 2003; Espeland and Stevens, 1998). Commensurate practices simplify, exclude, and disregard information in order to find common ground, enabling those undertaking commensuration to render invisible those differences they find objectionable. In our model, this boundary object is the proposal which renders irrelevant forms of knowledge which are not specified by procurement. Commensuration, therefore is both a reflection of, and a medium for, powerful agents who can use it to 'enlarge decision-making or legitimate preordained decisions. It can be cynically manipulated by elites or it can limit their discretion' (Espeland and Stevens, 1998, p. 332).

Commensuration and commodification in our study are, therefore, not simply methods for cutting costs or shaping exchange value but also mechanisms for the exercise of power of specific groups, and it is against this backdrop that the tactics of resistance by both managers and consultants can be understood. By establishing ownership of codified documents and by translating the words of both managers and consultants on the terms of procurement, procurers lay claim to being legitimate arbiters of the management problem and its solution. As Abbott (1988) suggests, active claims of ownership and the legitimacy of diagnosis are common weapons in the battleground between competing professions. However, in studies of consultancy, most analyses of colonization and 'turf battles' have focused on struggles between producers such as banks, consultancies, and audit firms (McKenna, 2006; Scarbrough, 2002; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2001) rather



than non-producers. Our study therefore highlights how intermediaries (procurers) and consumers (client managers) are also critically involved in this contestation.

## CONCLUSION

In demonstrating how procurers commodify management knowledge, our study has a number of implications for our understanding of management knowledge more broadly. First, we provide a new and different interpretation of the commodification of management knowledge. Traditional accounts of management knowledge have represented commodification as the preserve of knowledge producers (Fincham, 1995; Kieser, 1997; Kipping, 2002), and often assumed that non-producers are exploited and commodified by these producers (Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999; Adcroft and Willis, 2005; Kieser, 2002). Here, we have shown that this is not necessarily the case. By commodifying consultancy knowledge, procurers put themselves in a dominant position to generate a lower exchange-value for the knowledge they are buying.

Second, we have shown how commodification by procurement is resisted by producers (such as consultants) and consumers (in our case, client managers). For consultants this is prompted partially by concerns over profit margins, but is also a response to the movement of procurement, as a relatively new function, into the territory of defining solutions to management problems. This is a useful addition to the literature on commodification where struggles tend to be represented as contestations *between* competing producers (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2001) or by different actors within the same producer (Heusinkveld and Benders, 2005).

Third, our study further develops theories of commodification. Dominant accounts of knowledge commodification focus on processes of codification, translation, and abstraction (Benders and van Veen, 2001; Fincham, 1995; Morris, 2001; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2001). Our study clarifies the relationship between these processes, showing that they are often simultaneous and that translation is the dominant process – being involved in both abstraction and codification. Furthermore, we demonstrate these processes generate only *commensurate* offerings – they do not generate an exchange-value for knowledge, which the wider sociological literature insists is an essential step in the production of a commodity (Marx, 1976; Simmel, 1972). Thus, our model of commodification adds processes of ‘comparison’ and ‘valuation’ which, we suggest, are necessary theoretical additions for the production of exchange-value and the generation of a ‘true’ knowledge commodity.

These contributions suggest five areas for future research that may contribute to the further specification and generalization of our model. First, commodification, when undertaken by buyers rather than producers, not only helps procurers to reduce prices, but also reduces the ambiguity, or ‘interpretative viability’, that many scholars argue is central to the successful diffusion of consulting wares (Alvesson, 2001; Benders and van Veen, 2001; Giroux, 2006; Kieser, 1997; Nicolai and Dautwiz, 2010). Future research might explore how the growth of procurement potentially results in a lessening of the ‘interpretative viability’ of consulting offerings and changes the variety and impact of consulting products.

Second, and related to the above, the impact of procurement on both consulting knowledge and profit margins may potentially hamper the ability of consultancies to innovate (O'Mahoney, 2010). In this regard, future studies might examine how procurement's activities impact on the attempts of consultancies to commodify their own knowledge as a source of increased margins and capabilities. Added to this, future studies could explore the different local factors underlying differences in the way procurement values consulting offerings. The two-stage nature of our model also raises questions as to how variability in one of those stages impacts the other; for example, do greater levels of commensuration necessarily lead to greater commodification or a lower exchange value?

A third potential avenue for further development is the related theme of colonization (see also Morris, 2001). It seemed apparent in this research that the growing involvement of procurement in consultant–client interactions posed a 'territorial' challenge for managers and consultants, many of whom felt that the encroachment of procurement on their territory challenged both their legitimacy and identity as experts. This article necessarily focused upon the commodification aspects of procurement's involvement, but future research could equally concern itself with questions of procurement's colonization of adjacent territory and how and why this is resisted and legitimized by different actors. The question of how the actions of other managerial occupations, such as human resources, IT, or accounting, might reproduce and extend their institutional or professional claims in shaping management knowledge, could help extend both empirical knowledge and theory.

Fourth, our model can be further generalized by examining how the processes of comparison and valuation we have identified might equally be applicable to studies of commodification by knowledge producers. Few studies of the commodification of consultancy services have paid much attention to the ways in which consultancies compare their offerings with those of their competitors. This may stem from the need to ensure the legitimacy of their service offerings while differentiating themselves from their competitors and enhancing their competitive positioning (Deephouse, 1999). Whilst Heusinkveld et al. (2009) introduce the possibility of comparison and valuation in their examination of 'boundary scanning' in management consultancies, future research might examine whether current conceptualizations of commodification in consulting services require further development.

Finally, it would be useful to test and develop the model that we have developed with regard to both management knowledge but also in other areas such as the sociology of culture. Specifically research might examine whether the processes and relations in our model hold both in different contexts, for example, education (Naidoo and Jamieson, 2005; Shumar, 1997), and if the object of commodification is different, such as service provision (Whitfield, 2001).

That procurement commodifies professional services will not be news for consultants or clients. Those we interviewed were well aware of the impact of procurement's role in this space. However, our insights regarding knowledge commodification highlight important challenges for clients, procurers, and consultants alike. For clients and procurers, the challenge is to ensure that the cost savings and greater control exerted by procurement over consultancy knowledge is balanced by maximizing the potential of that knowledge. In addition, the reasons behind the contestation between procurers and

client managers will be important to bear in mind for companies that seek to introduce new procurement departments. For consultants, the insight is that the challenge from procurement does not relate simply to profit margins, but more broadly to the legitimacy of consultancy's expertise in identifying and framing business problems.

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