Employee-management Techniques: Transient Fads or Trending Fashions?

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In this theory development case study, we focus on the relations across recurrent waves in the amount and kind of language promoting and diffusing, and then demoting and rejecting, management techniques—techniques for transforming the input of organizational labor into organizational outputs. We suggest that rather than manifesting themselves as independent, transitory, and un-cumulative fads, the language of repeated waves cumulates into what we call management fashion trends. These trends are protracted and major transformations in what managers read, think, express, and enact that result from the accumulation of the language of these consecutive waves. For the language of five waves in employee-management techniques—management by objectives, job enrichment, quality circles, total quality management, and business process reengineering—we measure rational and normative language suggesting, respectively, that managers can induce labor financially or psychologically. The results reveal a gradual intensification in the ratio of rational to normative language over repeated waves, suggesting the existence of a management fashion trend across these techniques. Lexical shifts over time, however, serve to differentiate a fashion from its predecessor, creating a sense of novelty and progress from the earlier to the later fashions.

Scholars have recognized for a long time now that so-called fads or fashions affect management techniques (Sumner, 1959), those linguistic prescriptions for how to transform organizational inputs into organizational outputs (Ghaziani and Ventresca, 2005). The "balanced score card" label, for example, denotes language prescribing behaviors necessary to transform certain financial and non-financial results into multi-dimensional measures of organizational performance. Organizations adopt this prescriptive language by behaving, or appearing that they behave, according to its prescriptions (Chevalier, 1991; Zbaracki, 1998; Czarniawska, 2005). Organizations disseminate stories about the success (or failure) in the use, or purported use, of management techniques, possibly causing their diffusion (or rejection) across other organizations (Zbaracki, 1998). This language also causes organizational stakeholders to react favorably (or unfavorably) to organizations' adoptions (or rejections) of such management techniques, enhancing (or decreasing) adopting organizations' and their chief executive officers' reputations, as well as stakeholders' contributions to both (Staw and Epstein, 2000).

The natural history of fads and fashions in management techniques manifests what scholars have called a management technique's popularity wave (Abrahamson, 1991; Burns and Wholey, 1993; Kieser, 1997; Carson et al., 2000; Scarborough and Swan, 2001). Following a latency phase in the popularity of a management technique, a rapid increase occurs in the amount of language promoting and diffusing this technique. The rapid increase usually gives way to a twofold outcome: first, to an equally rapid decrease in such promotional language and diffusion and, second, to a rapid increase in language demoting this technique, causing its widespread abandonment (Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999). Ultimately, both

types of languages—those promoting and demoting the techniques—diminish.

Scholars have tended to use the terms fad and fashion indiscriminately, however, when referring to the popularity waves of management techniques and to ignore that two very different theories—the theory of fads and the theory of fashions—explain such waves (Cole, 1999; Brindle and Stearns, 2001; Klincewicz, 2006). Theories of fads and theories of fashions describe two very different social processes. Fads are collective behaviors thought to arise from a chance conjunction of forces triggering their diffusion, whereas fashions result from supply and demand in a knowledge market. Each has very different consequences for what we will call "faddish" or "fashionable" popularity waves in management techniques, depending on which theory we invoke to explain these waves (Abrahamson, 1991; Strang and Soule, 1998).

Currently, a large proportion of the literature on the popularity waves of management techniques relies either explicitly or implicitly on the theory of fads, which suggests that a chance conjunction of social forces causes waves in the popularity of management techniques (Abrahamson, 1991; Gill and Whittle, 1993; Abrahamson and Rosenkopf, 1993; Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999). As a result, the theory of fads suggests that different faddish popularity waves of management techniques occur independently of each other. Consequently, scholars have generally studied one faddish wave in the popularity of a single management technique at one time. Furthermore, certain scholars have concluded that simplistic, and often illogical as well as social, imitative forces cause the choices impelling faddish popularity waves in management techniques (Gill and Whittle, 1993). As a result, scholars have long considered fads largely insignificant, non-rational swings that come and go, with little or no lasting impact on the language of management techniques and on organizations themselves (Cole, 1989). Yet a closer look at some of these management techniques shows them to be far from insignificant. Strategic downsizing, for instance, the handmaiden of business process reengineering, gave rise to the often disruptive and needless firing of thousands of employees (Cameron, 1998).

Although the theory of fads implies that transitory swings in the popularity of management techniques have single-fad, unimportant, and non-cumulative impacts on the language of management techniques, theories of fashion—gradual, protracted, and major trends over time—suggest that fashions in management techniques, like other fashions, cumulate over time (cf. Blumer, 1969). Such transformations would occur because of the accumulation of consecutive waves in the popularity of language promoting (or demoting) the diffusion of management techniques. Taken together, rather than singly, fashion trends are likely to have multi-fashion, important, and cumulative impacts on the prescriptive language of management techniques and on the behavioral enactments of these prescriptions. To advance our arguments about management fashion trends, we conduct a theory development case study and use the concept of management fashion trends we develop to study empirically a succession of five

popularity waves in employee-management techniques—prescriptions for transforming labor, as an input, into organizational outputs—to assess whether a management fashion trend linked the language of these five techniques.

FROM FADS TO FASHION TRENDS

The theory of fads originates from the more general sociological theory of collective behavior (Smelser, 1963; Turner and Killian, 1972; Coleman, 1990: 197–240). Collective behavior theory states that when a conjunction of social forces weakens, or removes, normal institutional constraints, then certain forms of collective behavior can occur: riots, stampedes, hysterical epidemics, wildcat strikes, speculative bubbles, and management fads. These behaviors propagate when social actors imitating each other's choices impel a form of bandwagon imitation. Bandwagon imitation occurs when social actors in a collectivity adopt an innovation because of pressures caused by the sheer reputation-weighted number of other social actors who have already adopted this innovation in the collectivity (Abrahamson and Rosenkopf, 1993). The term collectivity denotes a group of actors in which each social actor can find out about other actors' adoption behavior, often through interorganizational networks (Abrahamson and Rosenkopf, 1997).

Those who have theorized about the emergence of management fads have attributed them to a chance conjunction of social forces loosening management institutions' normative constraints on organizations' choices of management techniques. Gill and Whittle (1993), for instance, exemplified this theory by describing how the coming together of a charismatic guru, a faddish management technique, and gullible managers deinstitutionalized normal approaches to running organizations, triggering euphoric bandwagon imitation of the guru's management technique (see also Jackson, 2001). Abrahamson and Fairchild (1999) also developed and illustrated empirically an in-depth explanation for management fads, using a variant of Smelser's (1963) process theory of fads. They posited three necessary, though not sufficient conditions that must co-occur to trigger a management fad like the quality circles fad they examined. First, Abrahamson and Fairchild (1999) posited "social strain" —anxiety (or excitement) generated across the collectivity by the common experience of a threat (or opportunity) that weakens or eliminates the usual institutional constraints. Second, what Smelser (1963) called "short-circuited logic" —a form of simplified and incorrect logic guiding the choices of management techniques under conditions of high emotional stress—must occur. Third, they posited the existence of a "precipitating event," namely, the collapse of the previous fad.

These theories of fads, however, are wanting in several respects. First, because fads purportedly occur in response to a chance conjunction of social forces, research has consciously or unconsciously focused on understanding only one fad. This choice has shaped the questions scholars have pursued. For example, Barley, Meyer, and Gash (1988) studied the evolution of only the corporate culture fad and asked questions pertaining to the interactions between the academ-

ic and practitioner communities in propelling this fad. David and Strang (2006) asked whether the backgrounds of consultants promoting only the total quality management fad varied over its wavelike life cycle. Zbaracki (1998) examined how adopters of only total quality management appropriated and adapted the main themes of this fad as they shaped the discourse propelling it. Hackman and Wageman (1995) compared the popular, diffused version of only total quality management to the theoretical roots of the fad in their conceptual analysis of the ideas underlying it. On certain occasions, researchers have examined the reason for fads' collapse. Greve (1995), for example, examined the diffusion of only one episode of strategy abandonment.

Second, scholars and particularly popular writers have typically trivialized fads because of their "short-circuited logic" (Smelser, 1963). Abrahamson and Fairchild (1999: 728) provided one example of such short-circuited logic impelling the quality circles fad: "QCs have worked in Japan; Japanese supremacy in industrial production is testimony to that. Now, many U.S. companies are trying QCs as well (Graham, 1981)." Such short-circuited, flawed reasoning has caused fad theorists to attribute the adoption of fads to non-rational social motives. Cole (1989), for example, articulated the "caffeine dose" theory of fads. It suggests that organizations will adopt any apparently new and neatly packaged management technique, regardless of its effectiveness, because it impels, at a minimum, a burst of activity in an organization, combating organizational inertia. So the content of one management fad matters little because succeeding fads only need to provide another caffeine dose of change. The theory of fashion, however, provides a different way of understanding waves in the popularity of management techniques.

The Theory of Fashions

The theory of fads suggests that imitation spreads the language communicating management techniques across networks of organizations that adopt (or reject) them (Abrahamson, 1991; Strang and Soule, 1998). This mechanism of the diffusion of management techniques by bandwagon imitation, in which one adopter causes adoption by other organizations in its network, differs from diffusion by "broadcast," in which organizations specialized in broadcasting broadcast language about a popular management technique to other organizations, causing some of them to adopt it (Hirsch, 1972; Rogers, 1995). Van den Bulte and Lilien (2001), for instance, showed how adding a variable denoting advertising language about tetracycline in medical journals rendered insignificant variables for network effects in explaining tetracycline's diffusion across physicians. Closer to the field of organization and management theory, language used in the media sped up the introduction of matrix management (Burns and Wholey, 1993) and prompted mergers and acquisitions (Haunschild and Beckman, 1998).

The theory of fashions, unlike the theory of fads, stems from the theory on the production of culture (see Peterson and Anand, 2004, for a review). This sociological theory suggests that culture does not simply mirror popular demand (Peter-

Figure 1. Case Illustration of a fashion trend in fluctuations in skirt width between 1788 and 1933, based on data from Richardson and Kroeber (1940).
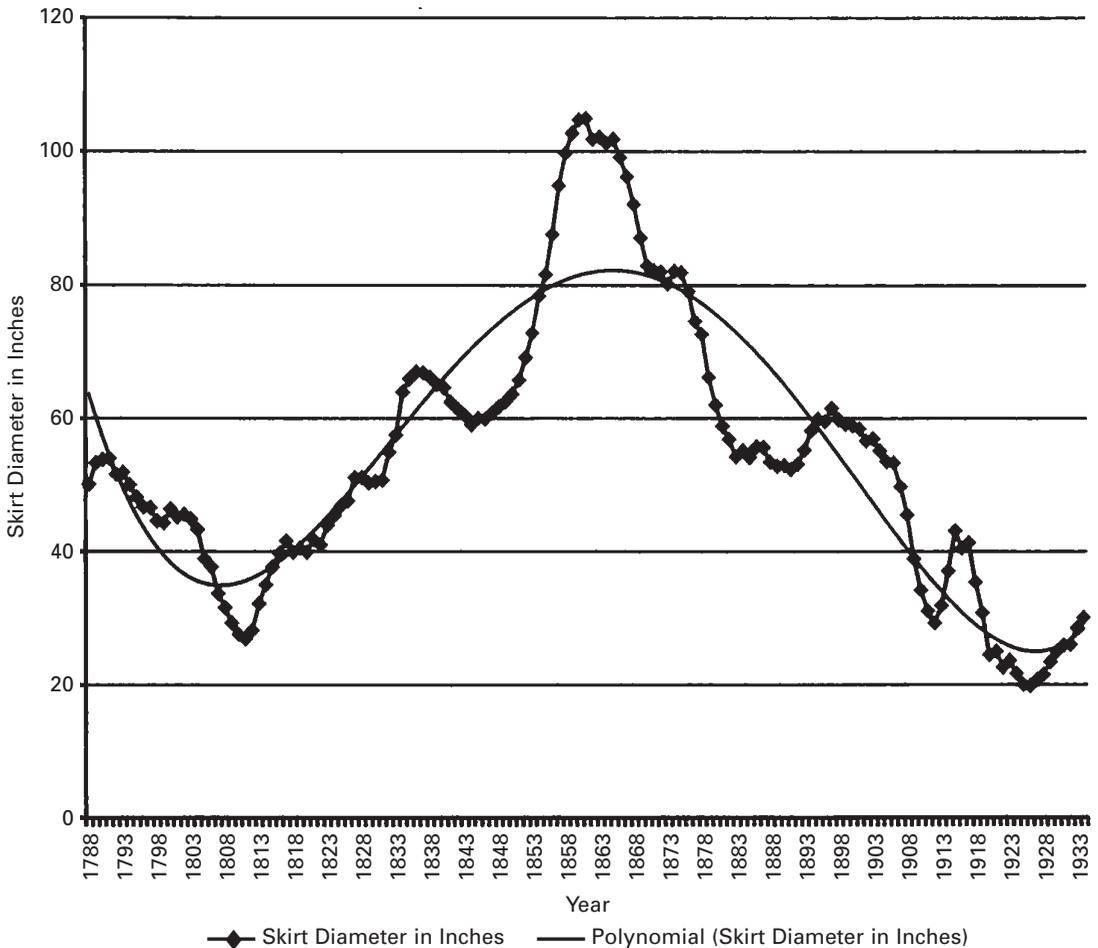
son, 1979). Instead, organizational systems sense popular demand and both supply and broadcast cultural forms that satiate this popular demand (Hirsch, 1972). In the case of fashion, fashion-setting organizations constitute the supply side of an institutionalized fashion-setting market, whereas fashion followers constitute the market's demand side. Fashion setters sense the demand of fashion followers, produce fashionable forms, and broadcast them to fashion followers.

Blumer (1969) stressed how recurrent fashions cumulate into what he called "fashion trends," gradual, protracted, and major transformations in the fashionable forms that fashion setters broadcast successfully. Three fashion case studies from outside the field of management help illustrate the incremental processes by which succeeding fashions bring about major changes in social forms. In the first case, on fashion in women's dresses, most people believe that the lengths of dresses' hemlines, as well as their widths, fluctuate with little apparent rhyme or reason almost year after year. This fluctuation in single fashions masks clear trends across successive fashions. As figure 1 reveals, for example, despite yearly fluctuations in the width of skirts, Richardson

Figure 2. Case illustration of a fashion trend in fluctuations in the percentage of clean-shaven models between 1842 and 1972, based on data from Robinson (1976).
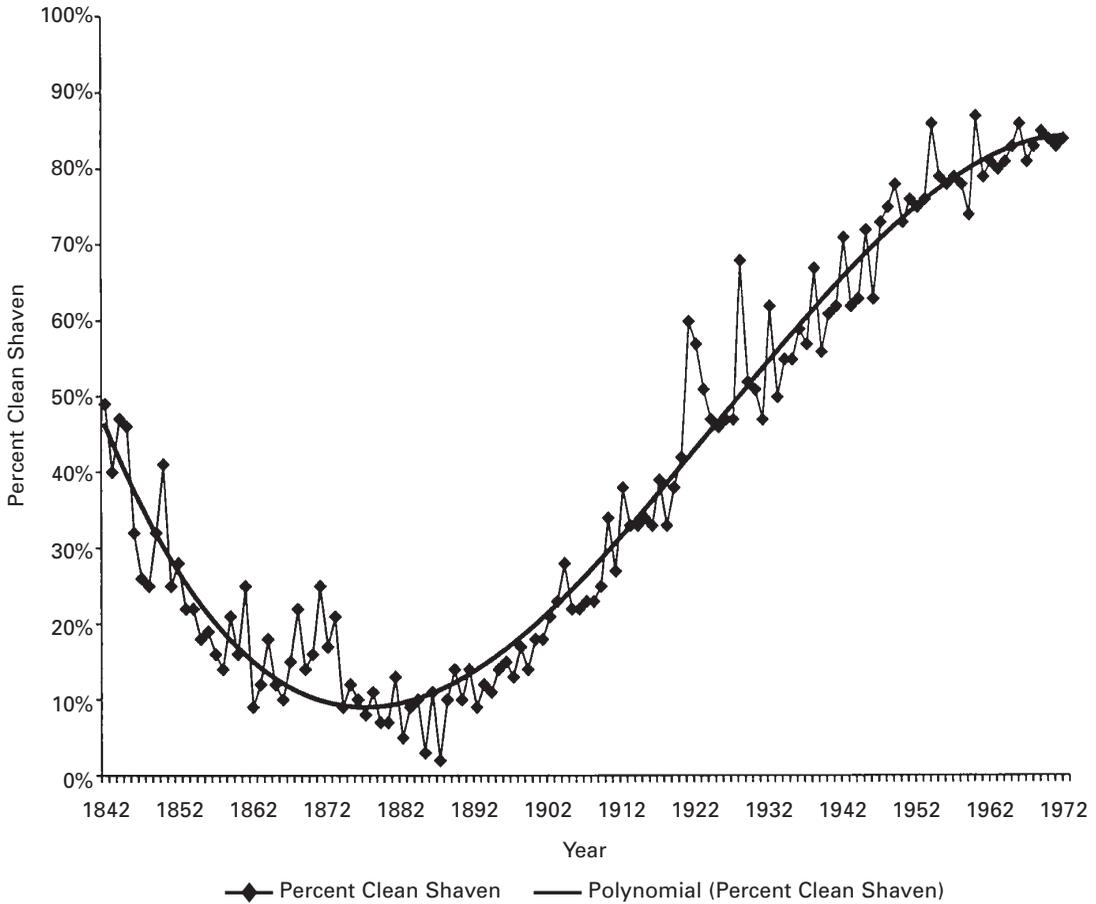
and Kroeber (1940) found a long-term fashion trend between 1787 and 1933, as evidenced by the polynomial trend line, with a peak in 1858 and troughs in 1810 and 1926.

In the second case, Robinson (1976) measured the hirsuteness (length of sideburns, beards, and mustaches) depicted in the pictures of male models in the pages of the *Illustrated London News,* between 1842 and 1972. As figure 2 shows, despite yearly variability in the fashionability of different degrees of masculine hirsuteness, Robinson (1976) found a long-term fashion trend in the amount of hair on male fashion models' faces, indicated by the polynomial trend line, with a hirsuteness peak in 1892, followed by a gradual increase in the clean-shavedness of men until the study window closed in 1972.

Such short-term variability along long-term fashion trends does not restrict itself to women's dresses and men's facial hair. It also appears in architecture and in auto design, for example (Robinson, 1958). In the third case study, Robinson (1975) revealed a fashion trend in the sleekness of cars (ratio of length to height) between 1925 and 1973, an imperceptibly gradual decline of 21/2 feet in roof height over 50 years.

Fads or Fashions?

These case studies demonstrate that although each instantiation of a fashion appears isolated, the sequence of fashions cumulates into a clear directional trend. The advantage of the theory of fashions over the theory of fads lies in providing this cumulative, directional dimension. Viewed in this way, new fashions both grow out of and extend previous fashions. As such, fashions connect and cumulate, rather than constituting individual and unpredictable responses to breakdowns in institutional constraints. Blumer's (1969) theory explains the evolution of fashion trends and why fashion consumers pursue new fashion extensions along these trends.

Blumer's theory of fashion. According to Blumer (1969), fashion setters attempt to sense fashion consumers' preferences. Fashion setters hope that the forms they select, and try to launch into fashion, will become highly profitable because they match fashion consumers' shifting preferences and, as a result, will be widely adopted by these consumers. The offerings of fashion setters who fail to correctly identify consumers' shifting preferences meet with little consumer demand and may even drive fashion setters out of business (Koplin-Jack and Schiffer, 1948). Thus the rules of the market discipline fashion setters.

Fashion setters cannot know consumers' exact preferences in advance. They can, however, develop an incipient conception of what consumers might want. Blumer's (1969) theory suggests that consumers' preferences have two dimensions. First, fashion consumers have a "current preference" for a particular type of form (e.g., a wider tie). Second, they also have a "trending preference" for a series of forms that will increasingly resemble a particular ideal type (e.g., a maximally wide tie). Consumers' trending preferences thus evolve along what we call a trending axis. A trending preference for narrower ties, for instance, defines a trending axis anchored at two oppositional poles. One ideal type of tie manifests itself by the widest possible tie, and the other ideal type embodies itself in the narrowest possible tie. Fashions trend gradually along such trending axes. Succeeding fashions move from wider to narrower dresses, or vice versa, along the sartorial trending axis (Richardson and Kroeber, 1940); male models from more hairy to more depilated, or vice versa, along the hirsuteness trending axis (Robinson, 1976); and cars from boxier to sleeker, or vice versa, along the auto-body trending axis (Robinson, 1975).

Blumer's (1969) theory of fashions explains why fashion trends occur and why succeeding fashions intensify along trending axes. If, in their constant search for fashion followers' preferences, one of the many fashion setters launches a fashion that deviates from the ongoing fashion trend (launches a shorter skirt when the trend for skirts has been longer and longer), and the deviant fashion becomes popular, this fashion reveals to all fashion setters not only fashion consumers' current preference but, more important, the emergence of a new trending preference (one toward shorter skirts). At the time of such a fashion trend reversal, the community of fashion setters usually perceives only vaguely the new trending preference, because even fashion consumers experience their trending preferences as indistinct and incipi-

ent. If the fashionable, shorter skirt of year one gives way to an even shorter successful fashionable skirt in year two, however, the direction of the trending axis becomes clearer not only to fashion setters but also to fashion consumers. So the choice of year three's fashion becomes even less ambiguous.

Whereas our examples to this point have been mostly cosmetic, Blumer's (1969) theory applies to fashions in social forms quite broadly, and similar recurrent processes in the management fashion market should generate fashion trends in management techniques. Repeated fashion cycles would both clarify and reinforce the direction of the trending axis for management techniques and drive fashionable techniques further and further along that trending axis.

Fashion trends in management techniques. A number of scholars have examined how Blumer's (1969) theory of fashions extends to single management techniques (e.g., Abrahamson, 1991, 1996; Czarniawska and Sévon, 1996; Ruling, 2002; Czarniawska, 2005). To build on and extend this more recent work about fashion, and theorize that the scope of Blumer's (1969) theory extends to fashion trends across multiple fashionable management techniques, requires reconsidering several aspects of that theory and prior work.

First, whereas Blumer (1969) paid little attention to the role of language in fashion, when it comes to management, management fashion theorists have applied the work of Barthes (1967) and stressed the significance of language in theories of management fashion. Management fashions exist in large part as linguistic artifacts, but with behavioral consequences, nonetheless (e.g., Strang and Meyer, 1993; Zbaracki, 1998; Czarniawska, 2005). Such consequences are likely to be relevant in assessing fashion trends across fashionable management techniques.

Second, management and organizational scholars who extend Blumer's (1969) theory point to two types of norms driving the market for management fashions. The first one is rational norms: expectations that management techniques will offer the most efficient solutions to important ends (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). Conformity to rational norms explains why management techniques that conform to these norms might go in and out of fashion. The second is progressive norms: expectations that management techniques will progress over time (i.e., will be replaced repeatedly by new and improved rational techniques) (Abrahamson, 1996). Conformity to progressive norms explains why there needs to be an ongoing supply of new and improved management techniques that conform to rational norms in the management fashion market. In terms of trends across fashionable management techniques, then, one can reasonably ask what impacts rational and progressive norms have on the trending process. One possible answer is that rational and progressive norms will create current and trending management fashion consumers' preferences, respectively. Rational norms engender current preferences for management techniques that conform to rational norms. Progressive norms engender trending preferences for a series of techniques that will

increasingly progress toward a particular ideal type of management technique. In short, consumers' progressive preferences should drive succeeding fashions, conforming to rational norms, along a trending axis.

Third, Blumer's (1969) theory of fashions suggests that management fashions should intensify along a trending axis. It does not, however, provide an answer to the question of which axis. Because management fashions manifest themselves through language, however, we posit a linguistic trending axis, building on the work of Barley and Kunda (1992), who suggested such a linguistic trending axis. Barley and Kunda (1992) distinguished two linguistic rhetorics anchoring the poles of a linguistic trending axis: rational and normative.[1] Barley and Kunda labeled as "rational rhetorics" the language that promotes a family of fashionable management techniques proposing that work processes can be formalized and rationalized to optimize labor productivity, as can the reward systems that guarantee recalcitrant employees' adherence to these formal processes. The scientific management rhetoric, for instance, includes a family of techniques consisting of rate setting, time studies, motion studies, and so on (Abrahamson, 1997). The opposite linguistic rhetoric, Barley and Kunda labeled as "normative rhetorics," the language that advocates a family of fashionable management techniques proposing that employees can be rendered more productive by shaping their thoughts and capitalizing on their emotions. Based on this work of Barley and Kunda (1992), we speculate that the language of consecutive employee-management fashions would trend, over time, between rational and normative linguistic ideal types.

Questions

Applying our extension of Blumer's (1969) theory of fashions and the trending process to employee-management fashions suggests that progressive norms impel a linguistic trending process across succeeding fashionable management techniques over time. Each subsequent fashion embodies a gradual movement farther along an axis with rational and normative poles as its linguistic ideal types—a rational-normative trending axis. We use our arguments to formulate an orienting question guiding our empirical investigation:

Question 1a: Does language, across succeeding employee-management fashions, trend along a rational-normative trending axis?

Unlike the other types of fashionable forms we considered— dresses, facial hair, auto bodies—the language of single employee-management fashions evolves during their life cycle. Abrahamson and Fairchild (1999), for instance, showed that there were high levels of excitement in the early stages of the quality circles fashion, as evidenced by the higher frequency of emotional and unreasoned language in the early stages of that fashion. When excitement subsided during the fashion's downswing, language became less emotional and more reasoned. David and Strang (2006) found that the language of another management fashion, total quality management, also changed over its life cycle. The more normative language of early fashion setters, who had a background in

normative subjects such as psychology, dominated linguistic production about this fashion during its upswing. The more rational language of later fashion setters, who had a background in rational subjects such as statistics and quality control, dominated linguistic production about this fashion during its downswing.

Abrahamson and Fairchild's (1999) as well as David and Strang's (2006) research suggested that the normative and rational language of single fashions could evolve during their life cycle for at least two reasons. First, over the life cycle of a single employee-management fashion, fashion setters might shift their language along the rational-normative trending axis, either from more normative to more rational or vice versa. Alternatively, fashion setters with a more normative (or rational) background might replace fashion setters with a more rational (or normative) orientation. In either case, we can speculate that the community of management fashion setters would use increasingly rational (or normative) language during each fashion's period of popularity. We employ this line of reasoning to formulate an orienting question guiding our empirical investigation:

Question 1b: Does language, within each employee-management fashion, trend along a rational-normative trending axis?

Linguistic differentiation. Although the language disseminating employee-management fashions could undergo a movement along a trending axis, the language of employee-management fashions cannot appear to be only a simple trending process along such a trending axis. Norms of progress require the impression, for each fashion, that fashion setters have created an entirely new and improved employee-management fashion. In the sartorial case, for instance, consumers do not replace this year's fashionable brown skirt with next year's fashionable brown skirt simply because the latter is a shorter brown skirt. The skirt must not only appear shorter. It must also differ on some other stylistic dimension—more flowery, puffier, or more colorful, for example. Likewise, managers, in the grip of the business process reengineering fashion would not become enraptured with the language of a new business process reengineering fashion simply because it contained more rational language. For managerial demand for the next employee-management fashion to increase rapidly, the language of subsequent fashions must sound radically progressive by being different—something like the language of the Six-Sigma fashion, for instance. We use the term "fashion differentiation" to denote this progressive imperative in the language of employee-management fashions. Fashion differentiation occurs when new language differentiates each fashion from its predecessors. We formulate this idea as an orienting question guiding our empirical investigation:

Question 2: Does the language of succeeding employee-management fashions make them appear different?

Fashionable language thus should do more than make one fashion appear to be moving along a trending axis—what we call fashion trending. Fashionable language must also make

each fashion appear progressive relative to its predecessors—what we call fashion differentiation. Fashionable language, in short, contains a combination of variation across fashions and continuity along fashion trends (Czarniawska, 2005: 136).

METHODS

To study the possibility that management fashions trend along a rational-normative trending axis, we focused on fashions in rational and normative employee-management techniques. We based our initial data search on the sequence of four employee-management techniques revealed by Abrahamson and Fairchild (1999) over the 1970 to 1999 period: job enrichment, quality circles, total quality management, and business process reengineering. To limit left-censoring issues, we also added the one earlier technique that our data collection method could support, management by objectives.

These five techniques constitute different combinations of rational and normative employee-management techniques. Based on prior work (Hackman and Oldham, 1976; Barley and Kunda, 1992; Hammer and Champy, 1993), we classified each employee-management fashion as predominately rational or normative. In line with Barley and Kunda (1992), we refer to management by objectives as predominantly rational and to quality circles and total quality management as predominantly normative. Because other research did not examine job enrichment and business process reengineering in the rational and normative context, we engaged with the definitive texts describing these techniques. Based on our reading of Hackman and Oldham (1976), we classified job enrichment as predominantly normative. Based on our reading of Hammer and Champy (1993), we classified business process reengineering as predominantly rational. Due to data limitations, we could examine at best a five-fashion-long trend.

Question 1 Measures: Rational-Normative Trending Axis

To measure linguistic trending processes along a rational-normative trending axis, we used a computer-automated content-analysis methodology. We used abstracts of articles about the five management techniques from the ABI Inform database to measure the language of the five fashions. The ABI Inform database stores articles covering business-related topics from more than 2,000 professional, scholarly, trade, and general-interest periodicals. We used abstracts, rather than full text, for two reasons. First, scholars who have tested the difference in language between full texts of articles and their abstracts (e.g., Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999) have shown that abstracts constitute a good proxy for the entire text. Second, ABI Inform does not include the full text of each article back to the 1970s. To maximize the amount of text analyzed, we wanted to analyze the full population of articles, rather than a likely time-biased sample, and preferred a method that would allow us to go back to the 1970s. We used descriptive rather than inferential statistics because we used the entire population of articles, not a sample. We used the label of the employee-management technique as the subject heading in an ABI Inform database search. The subject

headings used were "management by objectives," "job enrichment," "quality circles," "total quality management," and "business process reengineering." The use of subject headings is the standard methodological procedure in these types of content-analytic studies (Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999; Spell, 1999; Raub and Ruling, 2001; Ghaziani and Ventresca, 2005; Giroux, 2006). Using this method, we obtained and analyzed a total of 12,174 abstracts spanning the period from January 1971 to August 2000.[2]

Rational-normative content-analysis dictionary. Computer-automated analysis differs depending on whether a single word or a word within the context of a larger textual unit (sentence, paragraph, or document) constitutes the unit of analysis. In our analysis, we followed the approach of using the single word as the unit of analysis (Stone et al., 1966). Thus we coded a word as normative or rational regardless of the context in which it appeared (see Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999, for a similar approach) for three reasons. First, and most important, the word alone denotes membership in a linguistic community. For instance, the sheer use of the word "interface" denotes membership in a linguistic community of computer aficionados, regardless of how "interface" is used. Likewise, the word "efficiency" alone denotes membership in a speech community that attends, at least in part, to the rational construct "efficiency." Second, we had a very large amount of textual data available, and focusing on the word as the unit of analysis allowed us to analyze all the data. Third, making coding judgments based on the context of words is appropriate only for much smaller corpora of text (Kelle, 1995; Kabanoff and Abrahamson, 1997). Moreover, it invariably introduces lower reliability in the measures due to the misjudgments of human coders. Stone et al.'s (1966) approach has the benefit of being completely reliable, as it depends only on computer word counts.

We followed a procedure similar to that used by Wade, Porac, and Pollock (1997) and Porac, Wade, and Pollock (1999) to develop a content-analysis dictionary for coding rational and normative words in the language of employee-management techniques. These authors started out by identifying the concepts they wanted to analyze and, through an iterative process, developed a content-analysis dictionary that distinguished which words belonged to which concepts. A computer count of the dictionary words measured the prevalence of each concept in the text analyzed. In our study, we measured the prevalence of rational and normative language. Below, we explain the two-step process we used for generating our rational-normative content-analysis dictionary.

Step 1: Neither rational nor normative. Each of the authors independently coded every word that appeared more than 30 times, a total of 4,301 words. The goal in this first step was to distinguish words that were neither rational nor normative. Excluded were parts of speech like "the" or "and" that serve a purely grammatical function, as well as words that had nothing to do with either rational or normative language, e.g., "consulting" or "turbine." We used the general definition presented earlier to distinguish rational or normative words from words that were neither rational nor normative. Rational

words were those connoting that work processes can be formalized and rationalized to optimize productivity, as can the reward systems that guarantee recalcitrant employees' adherence to these formal processes. Normative words were those connoting that employees can be rendered more productive by shaping their thoughts and capitalizing on their emotions. We erred on the side of being more inclusive, coding words that had the slightest rational or normative connotation. This left us with 2,520 words that were neither rational nor normative and 1,781 that we had to code as being either rational or normative.

We used Cohen's Kappa measure of intercoder reliability to evaluate the reliability of this first step (Cohen, 1960). Landis and Koch (1977) proposed the following scale to describe the degree of intercoder reliability denoted by Kappa's magnitude: 0.21–0.40, "Fair"; 0.41–0.60, "Moderate"; 0.61–0.80, "Substantial"; 0.81–1.00, "Almost Perfect." Not surprisingly, due to the looseness of our inclusion criteria, intercoder reliability, in this first step, fell in the moderate zone (0.50).

Step 2: Either rational or normative. One coder then examined the remaining 1,781 words that were either rational or normative. He developed a conceptual framework for creating a precise rational-normative content-analysis dictionary, an instrument used to code words as belonging to either the rational or normative categories (the codebook is available from the first author). Tables 1 and 2 depict the instrument developed for the second coding step.

To develop these categories, coder 1 developed three levels of organizational activities. The highest category level is rational or normative. At the second level, both the rational and the normative categories were divided into an individual and an organizational level (we show full definitions of these categories in tables 1 and 2). At the third level, individual activities were divided into three aspects of organizational work: analyzing, administering, and rewarding, while organizational activities were divided into two aspects of the organizational world: organizational and power. From here, the fourth category pertained to the particular tasks that enable the activity or organizational element described in the third level. Again, the tables show the full definition for each of these tasks. Coder 1 used this structure to classify the words by matching words with the particular fourth-level constructs to which they pertain according to the definitions presented in the tables. For example, in the context of rational language (level 1), an aspect of individual work (level 2) is analyzing as a rational and scientific activity (level 3). The tasks that enable this work are using analytic tools and thinking in analytic terms (level 4). The words that fit these level 4 categories and their definitions are "correlation," "forecast," or "simulation" (for analytic tools) and "define," "evaluate," or "judge" (for analytic terms). As a second example, in the context of normative language (level 1), an aspect of the organizational world (level 2) is power as an element of organizational life (level 3). The activities that enable power to manifest itself pertain to conflict and unions, as these terms describe the power dynamic between employees and managers (level 4). The words that fit these level-4 categories and their defini-

Table 1

Content Analysis Dictionary for Level-1 Rational Language

Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Description	Sample of coded words
Individual level	Analyzing: Rational and scientific analysis.	Analytic tools	Rational analysis is carried out using formal rationality and scientific tools and statistics.	Correlation, forecast, simulation
		Analytic terms	Terms denoting defining, evaluating and judging rationally, scientifically, and carefully, using facts, data, and findings.	Define, evaluate, judge
	Administering: Top-down management, excluding rewarding.	Goal setting	Setting goals, plans, intentions, strategies. .	Deadline, goal, strategy
		Managing	Terms related to top-down management.	Allocate, mandate, monitor
		Following	Terms related to following orders and performing according to orders.	Adherence, compliance, requirements
	Rewarding: Evaluating and rewarding performance extrinsically	Managerial evaluation	Performance metrics both positive (e.g., cycles) and negative (e.g., defects).	Cycles, defects, efficiency
		Extrinsic rewards	Terms having to do with extrinsic, largely financial rewards.	
Organizational level	Organizing: Organizational level constructs.	Structures	Organizational design terms, particularly those having to do with differentiation (e.g., departments) and integration (e.g., alignment).	Coordination, cross-functional, task
		Machines	Terms having to do with automation, whether machine or computer.	Automated, ergonomics, hardware
		Finance	Terms having to do with finance, accounting, economics, and money in general.	Cost-effective, cash, transaction
	Power: Organizational level constructs.	Superior-subordinates	Terms denoting managerial position of formal authority (e.g., manager, officer).	Executive, foremen, subordinate
		Domination	Terms denoting autocratic, top-down action toward individuals (e.g., centralization, supervision) and position lacking authority (e.g., subordinate).	Force, restrict, supervise

tions are "bargaining," "conflict," or "negotiations" (for conflict), as well as "grievances," "strikes," or "labor-management" (for unions).

Coder 1 then explained the coding categories and their underlying logic to a second coder, who proceeded to code the words. Kappa in the second step (deciding whether a word should be coded as rational or normative) fell in the substantial range (0.77). According to the criteria laid out by

Table 2

Content Analysis Dictionary for Level-1 Normative Language

Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Description	Sample of coded words
Individual level	Analyzing: Human characteristics.	Human characteristics Human psychology and cognitions	Terms focusing on human characteristics. Terms focusing on any and all characteristics of socio-psychological processes.	Ability, friendly, original, competent Commitment, emotional, insight
	Administering: Bottom-up management, excluding rewarding.	Leading	Terms wherein managers help employees.	Encourage, challenge, coach
		Empowering	Terms wherein managers give employees decision-making power.	Autonomy, democratic, self-managing
	Rewarding: Evaluating and rewarding performance intrinsically.	Evaluating	Measuring human harm to employees.	Burnout, turnover, resistance
		Rewarding	Intrinsic motivators.	Belonging, enjoyment, fulfillment
Organizational level	Organizational: Organizational level constructs.	Collectivities	Terms related to collectivities.	Family, group, interpersonal
		Organizational culture	Terms related to organizational culture.	Atmosphere, ideology, value
		Human resource management	Terms related to human resource management.	Hire, promote, train
	Power: Organizational level constructs.	Conflict	Terms related to labor strife.	Bargaining, conflict, negotiations
		Unions	Terms related to labor unions.	Grievances, strikes, labor management

Landis and Koch (1977), the 0.77 Kappa value suggests that our coding process generated a substantially reliable dictionary for distinguishing rational and normative language. The coders then resolved coding disagreements by discussing which decision fitted the definition in the code book more precisely.

Validity test for the rational-normative content-analysis dictionary. Rational and normative fashions denote constructs that should differ. To test whether our rational-normative content-analysis dictionary provided valid scores on normative and rational measures (discriminant validity), we assumed that the ratio of rational-to-normative coded words in the abstracts of normative fashions should differ substantially from the same ratio for rational fashions. In other words, we assumed that the language of normative fashions would have a smaller ratio of rational-to-normative words than the language of rational fashions. According to the classifications introduced above, both management by objectives and business process reengineering contain primarily rational language. Job enrichment, quality circles, and total quality management, by contrast, contain primarily normative language. Our results indicate that the average ratio of the number of rational-to-normative words was 1.36 for the normative techniques and 2.58 for the rational techniques—a 90 per-

cent difference that suggests that our measure has discriminant validity.

Question 1: trending measure. To answer questions 1a and 1b, we had to detect the axial direction along which fashion might trend—more normative, for instance—along a rational-normative trending axis. To measure trending along this axis, the computer counted the number of normative and rational words in the text of the abstracts of each fashion. We used this count to calculate three ratio measures that would reveal trending: first, what we call the "rational ratio," the ratio of rational words to the total words in the body of text for each fashion; second, what we call the "normative ratio," the ratio of normative words to the total words in the body of text for each fashion; and third, the measure described above as the "rational-to-normative ratio," the ratio of rational-to-normative words in the body of text for each fashion.

Question 1a: Cross-fashion trending. Question 1a asked whether trending along a rational-normative trending axis occurs across fashions. To examine cross-fashion trending, we aggregated the abstracts for each fashion. Then, for each fashion, we calculated each of the three ratios: rational, normative, and rational-to-normative. We then examined the changes in each ratio across the five fashions.

Question 1b: Within-fashion trending. Question 1b asked whether single fashions trend along the rational-normative trending axis. To explore this question, we divided the study window into three roughly equal periods: 1971–1979, 1980–1993, and 1994–2001. Instead of calculating the rational-to-normative ratio for each fashion across all years, we calculated this ratio for each fashion, separately, within each of these three periods. This procedure allowed us to see the changes across periods in the rational-to-normative ratio for each fashion.

Question 2 measures: The dual role of fashionable language. Question 2 asked how the language of employee-management fashions makes them appear both progressive and different. To measure progress, we used the measures of fashion trending described above. We also needed a second measure of what we called fashion differentiation, how the language of each fashion differentiates it from its predecessors to make it appear novel, rather than just progressively farther along the rational-normative trending axis.

Differentiation measure. The term lexicon refers to the set of unique words used at least once in a text. We reasoned that the language of one fashionable management technique would differentiate it from the next if it used a different lexicon, because the introduction of a new lexicon generates the impression of novelty in a management technique. To measure the degree of difference in the lexicon of our five fashionable management techniques, we aggregated the abstracts for each technique and formed each technique's lexicon by extracting a list of the different words used at least once in each technique's aggregated abstracts. Then we calculated the overlap between a pair of techniques' lexicons. Following Abrahamson and Hambrick (1997), we measured lexical overlap as the ratio of the actual number of words that co-occur in both

techniques' lexicons to the total number of words that could possibly co-occur, that is, the number of words in the smaller of the two lexicons. High overlap in the language of two fashions denotes low differentiation between these fashions.[3]

Validity test for the differentiation measure. Our fashion differentiation measure is perfectly reliable, as it is computer generated. To assess the convergent validity of our lexical overlap measure, we assumed that there would be a high lexical overlap between the language of all the fashions we coded as primarily normative (job enrichment, quality circles, and total quality management), as well as between the language of the fashions we coded as primarily rational (management by objectives and business process reengineering), when compared with the average lexical overlap across all five fashions.

With respect to convergent validity, the magnitude of the results was small but as predicted. The degree of lexical overlap was greater in the language of rational fashions (0.79) and normative fashions (0.73) than the average overlap between all fashions (0.72), but the degree of lexical overlap for the normative fashions was only slightly larger than the average. This second result may have occurred because, as we show below, normative fashions that succeeded each other—like job enrichment, quality circles, and total quality management—tended to have a relatively low overlap as a result of the need to differentiate the next from the previous fashion. In contrast, management by objectives and business process reengineering, whose rational language was already separated by three decades, had a very high overlap (0.79), lending further credence to our measure's validity.

To measure discriminant validity, we assumed that there would be lower lexical overlap between the lexicon generated by the aggregation of all normative fashions and that generated by the aggregation of all rational fashions than between the lexicon of all fashions taken together. With respect to discriminant validity, the degree of overlap between all rational and all normative fashions (0.69) was indeed lower than the overlap between rational fashions (0.79), normative fashions (0.73), and all fashions (0.72). Taken together, our tests of convergent and discriminant validity provide weak but consistent support for the validity of our lexical overlap measure.

Cross-fashion differentiation. We used the measure of lexical overlap to assess cross-fashion differentiation by examining the extent of lexical overlap between two fashions according to their sequential appearance, applying the logic presented above that showed the following sequential progression of management fashions: management by objectives, job enrichment, quality circles, total quality management, and business process reengineering.

MANAGEMENT FASHION TRENDS

Question 1a: Cross-Fashion Trending along the Rational-normative Trending Axis

Question 1a asked along which trending axis management fashion trends progress. After the transition from manage-

3
Consider an example in which one text has a lexicon of 5,000 words, another has a lexicon of 3,000, and assume that the same 1,500 words appear in both texts' lexicons. The maximum number of words that could occur in both texts' lexicons is 3,000. This would occur when every word in the text with the smaller, 3,000-word lexicon appears in the text with the larger, 5,000-word lexicon. To calculate lexical overlap, we take the actual number of words that the two lexicons have in common (1,500) and divide it by the maximum number of words both texts' lexicons could have in common (3,000). Lexical overlap equals (1,500/3,000)*100, or 50 percent.

Figure 3. Cross-fashion trending.
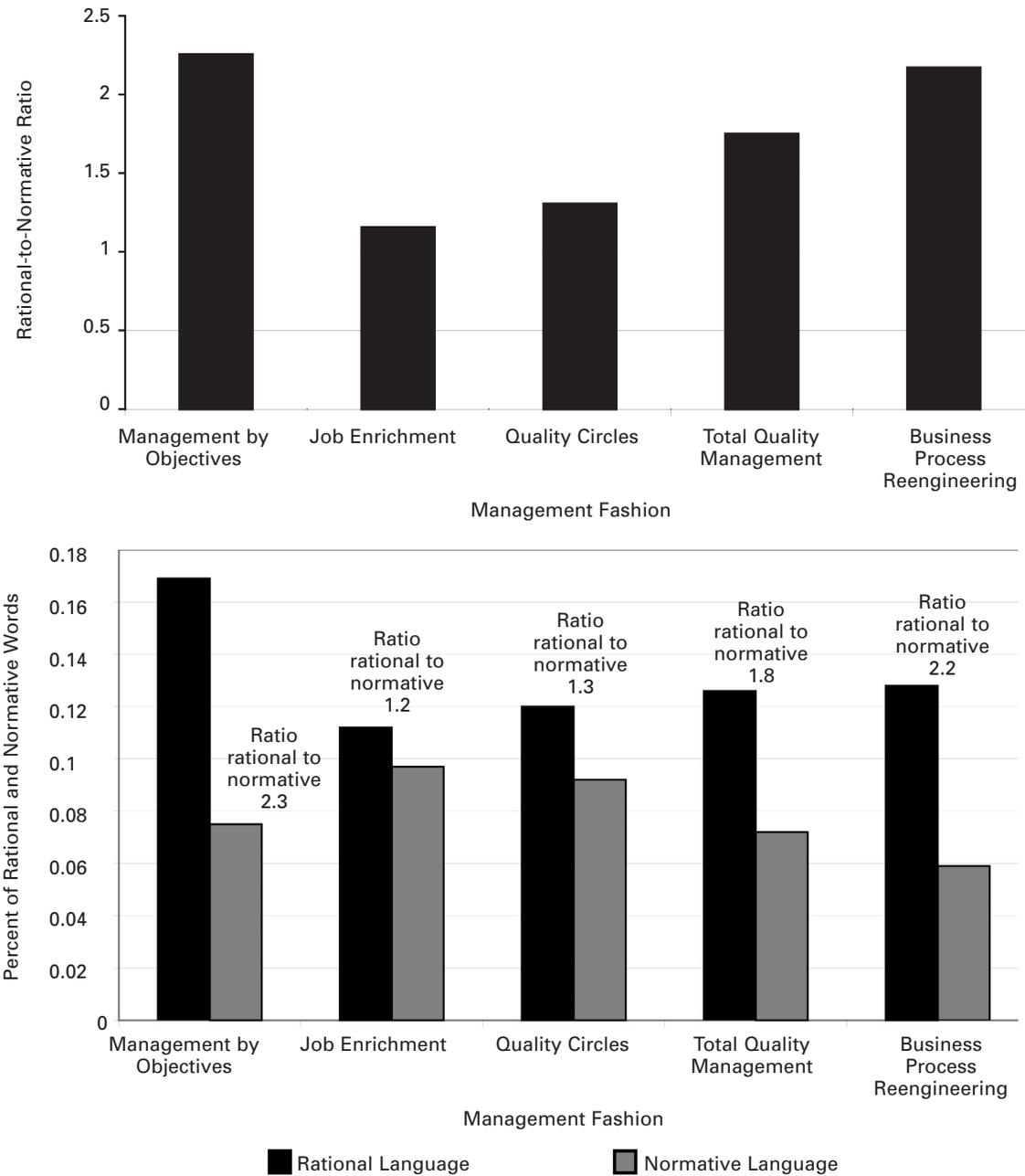
ment by objectives to job enrichment, which produces a 50 percent decrease in the rational to normative ratio, the results in the top part of figure 3 do reveal a trending process. More specifically, examining each fashion's rational-to-normative ratio, the top part of figure 3 reveals a four-fashion-long trend occurring along the rational-normative trending axis, from the normative toward the rational. In short, succeeding fashions display a gradual trending in the rational-to-normative ratio. The data also show the 1970 collapse (50 percent decrease) of a more rational rhetoric, as predicted by Barley and Kunda (1992) and Abrahamson (1997).

The bottom part of figure 3 graphs the rational ratio, alongside the normative ratio (percentage of thematic words to total words), for each of the five fashions. It tells a different story. First, for every one of the five fashions, rational and normative language coexists. Second, it indicates that rational language always tends to dominate normative language. On average, the percentage of rational language (13.6 percent) was 1.7 times greater than the percentage of normative language (8 percent) across the five fashions. Third, the results, in the bottom part of figure 3 indicate that what trended across each of the four succeeding fashions was the degree to which rational language dominated normative language. Therefore, rather than assuming that management fashions trend along a rational-normative trending axis, it might be more accurate to suggest that fashions trend along a linguistic axis anchored by two poles, one at which rational language dominates normative language more completely and the other at which it dominates it only partially.

The results suggest that succeeding fashions contain a mix of normative and rational language, which may seem to contradict Barley and Kunda's (1992) argument that normative and rational rhetorics belong to two irreconcilable poles of a cultural antinomy, and therefore that normative and rational language cannot coexist in one rhetoric but, instead, must reemerge intermittently through an alternation of purely normative and purely rational rhetorics. It must be remembered, however, that Barley and Kunda (1992: 393) also wrote that "there is considerable evidence that rational ideologies have always 'dominated' the managerial community, in the sense that they are more prevalent . . . but . . . that rationalism will be tempered by . . . surges in normative theorizing." Our case study's results support such a claim. In our study, the language of a management fashion does not shed all rational language during normative periods. Rather, the language of management fashions contains a greater, though gradually declining proportion of normative language. Therefore what changes as fashion trends drive fashionable management language is the ratio of rational-to-normative language across the succeeding fashions.

Additional corroboration of our results. A reexamination of the findings of Carson et al. (2000) lends further support to our notion of a trending process that underlies changes in popular management ideas, even though they drew completely different conclusions from their data and their argument rests implicitly on the theory of fads. Carson et al. (2000) examined 16 management fashions (not limited to employee-management fashions) and used experts to code their rational and normative content using a scale ranging from 1 to 5 (1 = "not at all a rational / normative theme" to 5 = "extremely rational / normative theme"). Rational themes were those that addressed enhancing the output and productivity of an organization, whereas normative themes were those that addressed the needs, concerns, and motivations of an organization's staff. As in our study, the results of Carson et al.'s coding process also revealed that fashionable management language can have both rational and normative themes. Although they did not investigate fashion trends, we

Figure 4. Findings for normative and rational themes in management fashion based on data from Carson et al. (2000).
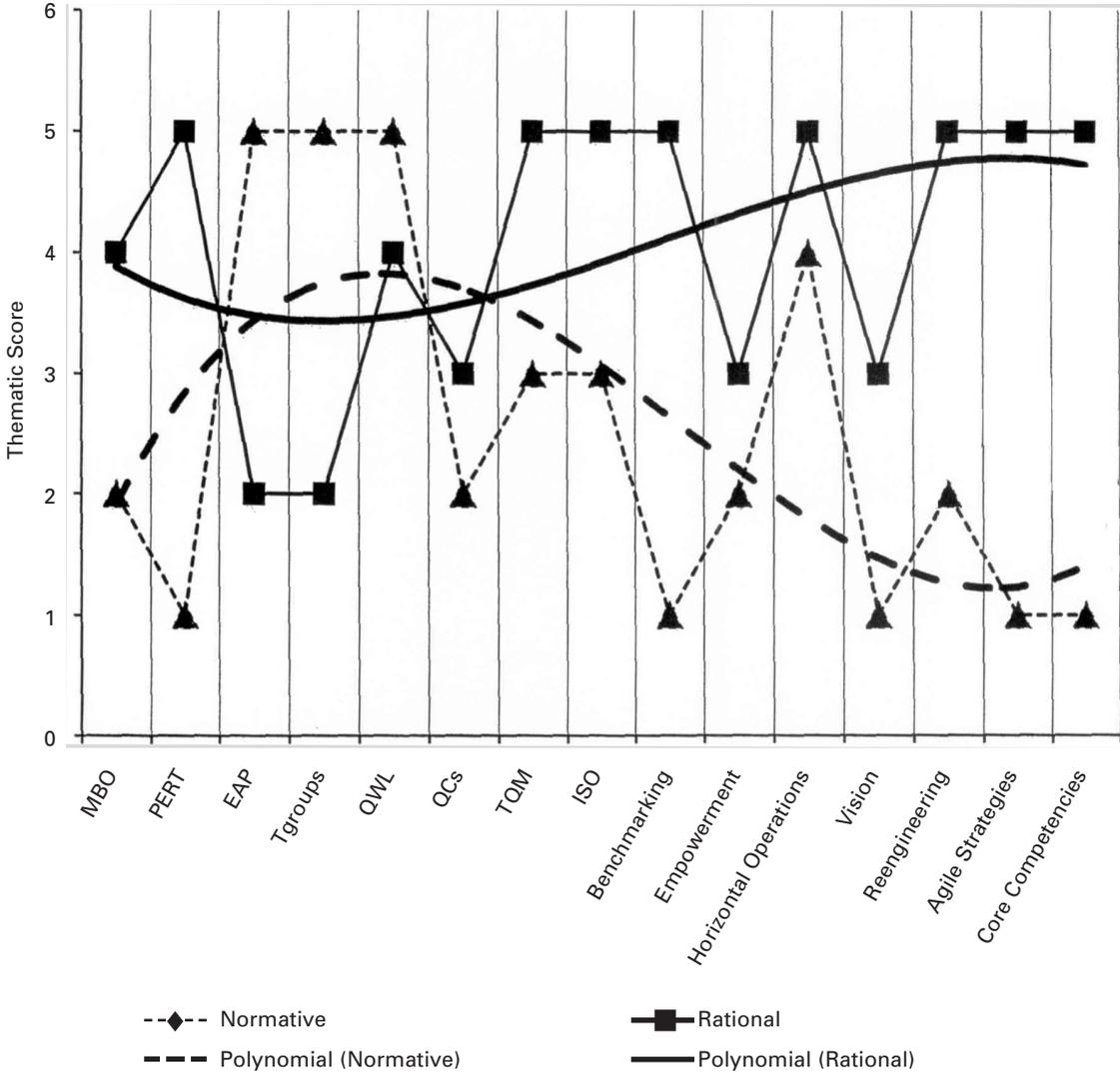

were able to use their data to corroborate our findings on the existence of fashion trends in management techniques.

Figure 4 graphs the thematic score, either rational or normative, given by Carson et al.'s (2000) coders to each management fashion they examined. As in the bottom part of figure 3, figure 4 reveals first that, overall, there is a higher rational thematic content across fashions. This finding is indicated by the polynomial trend line depicting each language—the solid line depicting rational language is almost always higher than the dashed line depicting the normative language.

Second, as our results in the bottom part of figure 3 suggest, figure 4 reveals a surge in normative themes, followed by a gradual decline in the normative themes. Importantly, the surge in normative themes corresponds to a decline in rational themes, while the decline in normative themes corresponds to a gradual rise in rational themes. Carson et al.'s (2000) results, in direct parallel to our results, can therefore be interpreted as suggesting that changes in fashionable

Figure 5: Within-fashion trending of rational-to-normative ratio by period.
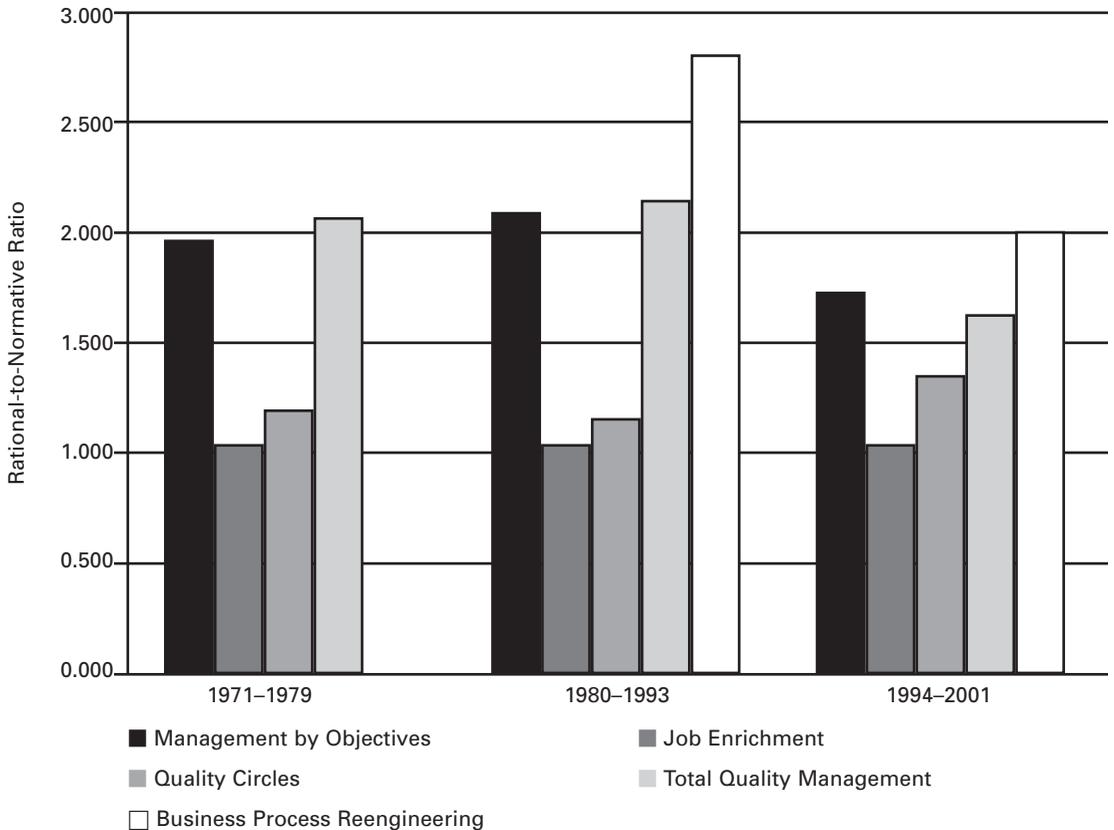

management language involve a gradual rebalancing of normative and rational language, rather than an abrupt abandonment of one type of language in favor of the opposite one. In this way, Carson et al.'s study, though the authors did not draw the same interpretation from its data, does replicate the findings in our study, providing additional support for our findings.

Question 1b: Within-fashion Trending along the Rational-normative Trending Axis

Question 1b asked whether fashion trends along the rational-normative trending axis also occur within fashions. Based on our finding of a four-fashion trend toward the rational pole of the rational-normative trending axis, we wanted to examine whether we would find a similar trend toward the rational during each of our three periods: 1971–1979, 1980–1993, and 1994–2001. Figure 5 indicates that for every one of the three periods, the rational-to-normative ratio for each fashion mirrors the aggregate pattern in the top part of figure 3. Moreover, the three periods are virtually identical, save for the absence of business process reengineering, which emerged only during the second period. Different periodizations did not reveal that within-fashion trending occurs along the rational-normative trending axis. Rather, it appears that the trending tends to occur across fashions rather than within them. Thus the incremental trending of fashionable management language along the rational-normative trending axis seems to be animated by fashion replacement, rather than by

Figure 6. Lexical overlap as a function of the number of intervening fashions.
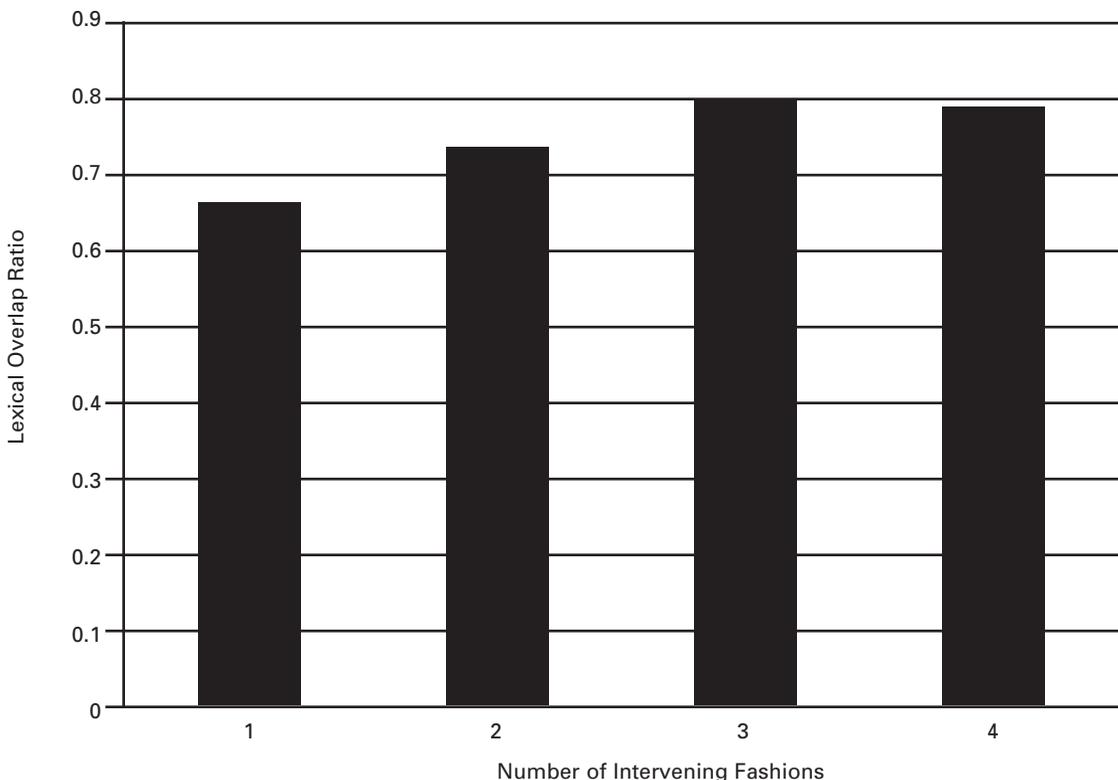
continuous fashion trending, both within and across fashions. The evidence shows that management fashions trend incrementally, each increment occurring by fashion replacement. We did not find evidence of continuous trending, which would occur if trending occurred both within each fashion and across succeeding fashions.

Question 2: The Dual Role of Fashionable Language

Question 2 pushed us to explore how the language of fashionable management techniques could serve two purposes. First, this language would cause a trend in fashionable management techniques along a trending axis. The results in figure 3 suggested, as we noted above, that fashionable language might have served this trending role, pushing fashionable employee-management techniques further along an axis on which rational language dominates normative language to a greater degree. Fashionable management language, we proposed, might also serve a second, differentiation purpose. This language would differentiate each fashion from its predecessor by introducing a novel lexicon. A first set of results supports this claim. Figure 6 graphs changes in the average lexical overlap between pairs of fashions, depending on the number of intervening fashions between these two fashions. It depicts the degree of average differentiation between fashions that succeed each other (no intervening fashions), between fashions separated by one fashion (one intervening fashion), and so on.

The results shown in figure 6 indicate that fashions that succeed each other (no intervening fashions) have a relatively smaller lexical overlap (0.653) than the average overlap (0.771) in the language of fashions that did not succeed each other (number of intervening fashions greater than zero). Overall, the abstracts discuss similar business topics and therefore resemble each other. Yet our results suggest some subtle differences, namely, that the lexicons of fashions that succeeded each other are more different from each other than are the lexicons of fashions that did not succeed each other. We speculate that new fashions need to be introduced with new words in order to convey their novelty. For this reason, succeeding fashions have relatively dissimilar sets of words.

Figure 6 also reveals that the degree of overlap does in fact increase, the larger the number of intervening fashions between the pairs of overlapping fashions. We reasoned that this could happen if language serves to differentiate one fashion from the next. In such a case, the greater the number of intervening fashions that separate two fashions, the lesser the need for the language of each fashion to differentiate itself from more distant fashions, as people forget past fashions. Thus the lexicon of more distant fashions would not need to be so different, and lexical overlap would tend to be greater.

DISCUSSION

Scholars have shown a strong renewal of interest in swings in the popularity of business techniques, as evidenced by special issues of the *Journal of Management Studies* and the *Scandinavian Journal of Management*. Here, we add to the extant literature first by differentiating between the theory of fads and the theory of fashions, to explain such swings, and then by suggesting that they not only have very different theoretical bases but also lead to very different findings and consequences.

In taking issue with the extant literature's focus on single-management-technique popularity waves, we were able to show that studying a series of recurrent waves may have certain benefits, in particular, if the interrelation between subsequent waves becomes the focus of analysis. Thus this study encourages current attention in the extant management fads and fashions literatures to shift from an overemphasis on the study of the rise and fall of single management fads to a greater emphasis on the cumulative effect of consecutive and thus implicitly interrelated management fashions. Our findings also suggest that management fashion setters introduce new fashions with lexicons that differ from those of previous fashions. We argue that these lexical shifts differentiate a fashion relative to its predecessors, creating a sense of novelty and progress from the earlier to the later fashion.

We also challenged the notion that swings in the popularity of social forms emerge from a kind of blind social imitation, which renders the collective choice of a fad largely unimportant, as long as another fad comes along in the near future. Instead, our findings raise the possibility that management-

fashion-setting markets provide an institutionalized mechanism in which fashion setters repeatedly satiate fashion followers' current and trending preferences. In contrast, the theory of fads recognizes no institution that could produce a stable base that would generate recurrent and cumulative popularity waves in management techniques. It ignores, therefore, how an institutionalized fashion market could cause recurrent popularity swings that, given their common genesis, would cumulate to cause major, protracted transformations in the managerial prescriptions that managers read, think about, express, and enact behaviorally in organizations.

We also argued against the theory of fads' implication that transitory swings in the popularity of management techniques have non-cumulative impacts on the language of management techniques. Our theory development case study, instead, extends the theory of fashions and introduces the study of what we call management fashion trends—gradual, protracted, and major transformations in what fashion followers read, think about, express, and enact behaviorally in organizations, brought about by the accumulation of consecutive swings in the popularity of language promoting (or demoting) management techniques.

In addition, the theory we developed pushes Blumer's (1969) theory of fashions forward in three important ways. First, Blumer largely ignored the role that language plays in fashion trends (Barthes, 1967). Here, we highlighted how fashionable management language might both drive fashion trends along a stable trending axis and serve a differentiating role, introducing stylistic elements that serve to create the impression that each fashion differs from its predecessors. We suggested, in short, how the language of fashion creates the impression of perpetual progression in the context of incremental continuity. Second, our study also made explicit another implicit element of Blumer's theory when we generalized it to the language prescribing management techniques: it is the norms of management progress governing the management fashion market that drive fashion trends along a trending axis in the realm of management techniques. Third, and most importantly, our findings suggest the particular trending axis along which fashions in employee-management techniques might trend: an axis on which rational language dominates normative language at one pole but does so to a much lesser extent at the other pole.

Finally, our theory development case study suggests how the theory of fashions and the notion of fashion trends might provide a different, though arguably more important avenue to pursue than the theory of fads that currently dominates the literature. To understand why, we only need to consider some of the massive business and social transformations brought about by fashion trends and put side by side the major difference between the ideal types at the extremes of the trending axes. For instance, the eight-foot wide hoop skirt and its opposite, the mini skirt each had distinct implications for the women wearing the skirts and the role they played in our society. Likewise, if we contrast job enrichment and its opposite, business process reengineering, job enrichment explicitly attempts to destroy routine work processes

and render them intrinsically motivating to employees. In opposition, business process reengineering explicitly attempts to introduce routine work processes and extrinsic motivators to fit employees to these newly routinized and optimized processes. Recurrent swings and trends in the popularity of employee management techniques, therefore, generate fundamentally different mechanisms for managing employees, with sometimes massive consequences for employees caught up in the swings' ebb and flow.

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