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Consultancies in public administration

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Abstract

Public administrations increasingly rely on consultancies to acquire policy knowledge, assess stakeholder dynamics, and evaluate governance systems. In this symposium, we explore the drivers and effects of this trend. Consultants offer advisory services, articulate governance trends, provide technical and programming expertise, as well as evaluation functions. Historically consultancies were introduced to public administrations to prevent market dominance and to respond to demands for specialized professional services. This relationship morphed into an expanded global market for a wide range of consultancy services that national and international administrations purchase. We explore how consultancies and public administrations interact through a discussion of task-setting based on recognition of: (i) what party can make claims to support a public *ethos*, (ii) what forms of *expertise* are most relevant for solving the problem, and (iii) *status* in who can best tackle uncertainties.

1 | INTRODUCTION

The task of governing through public administration belongs to governments and the organizations to which they have delegated authority. In recent decades, national and international public administrations have taken on more advice from consultancies in how their core tasks are defined and implemented. This includes not only specialist and technical fixes for operational issues, but also counsel on what stakeholders and constituencies are relevant, as well as frameworks for policy articulation and evaluation.

There is a long history that views the role of consultancies in public administration with a strong dose of skepticism. A little over 70 years ago, Morton Grodzins complained that what is being provided to public administration "is undoubtedly window dressing, sold as service by 'consultants', accepted as a mark of enlightenment by administrators, and verging in some cases on quackery" (Grodzins, 1951, p. 88). What is new, however, is a significant trend over the past two decades to increasingly use consultants in many administrations. Consultants are important diffusers of norms, policy frames, and professional practices across national and international public administrations (Armbrüster, 2006). They are involved in encoding practices on how work is done, as well as concepts and frames through which dissimilar entities can be viewed as facing similar problems (Hurl, 2017). Their clients include national and international public administrations, as well as firms, professional associations, and non-governmental organizations (Saint-Martin, 2004). The intensified relationship between consultancies and public administrations has led to important differences in how consultancies engage with types of political administrative cultures. This symposium asks: what mediates relations between consultancies and public administrations? We suggest that interactions between consultancies and public administrations center around recognizing who should be allocated what tasks. This recognition for task-setting focuses on a public *ethos* (who can serve the public interest?), *expertise* (who has appropriate knowledge?), and *status* (who can best mitigate uncertainties?). There is a great deal of variation in how consultancies and national and international public administrations recognize each other on ethos, expertise, and status. Exploring this variation is valuable, because we should not assume that consultancies automatically bring harm to public service. Rather, we should assess the relations that consultancies establish with public administrations, and the specific effects that this may produce.

Consultancies range in size and scale, from boutique freelancers, to specialized partners, up to the prominent Global Professional Service Firms (GPSFs), like Deloitte, Boston Consulting Group, and others (see Boussebaa & Faulconbridge, 2019). When we think of consultancies most gravitate to the agents that fit with a classic conception of management consultancy: highly paid agents who advise the contracting party on how to improve their organization's efficiency and performance (Du Gay & Vikkelsø, 2016, pp. 82–84). This "process" or "change management" aspect is only one function provided by consultancies to public administrations. Studies of how governments use consultants show that information technology (IT), human resources, project management, and accounting are dominant types of services provided (Howlett & Migone, 2014, p. 195). For Germany and Japan, IT is 30% of the consultancy market, while 20% in the UK and 10% in France (Sturdy & O'Mahoney, 2018, p. 550). In general, the scale of consultancy use speaks to their function, with small consultancies often fixing specific problems, mid-size consultancies modifying a policy setting for particular constituencies, and large consultancies inducing paradigm changes "from old-style regulation to self-regulation" (van den Berg et al., 2019, p. 8).

This old-to-new dynamic is noted in the extensive literature in public administration scholarship on New Public Management (NPM). A key feature of this research has been the reform of bureaucratic organizations through the entry of market-like mechanisms (Diefenbach, 2009; Hood, 1995; Hood & Peters, 2004). The trend toward the greater use of consultancies in public administration has been most prominent in governments that were early to embrace NPM ideas and practices, particularly in the Anglophone, Benelux, and Nordic countries (Diefenbach, 2009; Legrand, 2015; Saint-Martin, 2004; van den Berg et al., 2019). For example, van den Berg and co-authors note that spending on consultants was 2.68 times higher in Australia when comparing 1988 with 2016, and 3.5 times higher in Sweden if one compares 2003 and 2011 (van den Berg et al., 2019, pp. 96, 188). Löfgren and co-authors report that in a New Zealand public agency the number of consultants per government employee increased from 7 for each 100 in 2009 to 50 for each 100 in 2019 (Löfgren et al., 2022, p. 74). In these countries, there has been a positive association between the administrative aims of efficiency and efficacy with the notion that parties engaging in private competition have a grasp of current best practices.[1] In other words, high market status signals a capacity to access unique knowledge to solve problems.

Management consultants have been important in reforming core sectors, such as in health, education, employment, security, and environmental issues, especially in the introduction of reforms to these sectors (Hood & Peters, 2004, p. 274; Laage-Thomsen, 2022 and Sturdy et al., 2022 in this symposium). Many international public administrations have also made a positive association between NPM administrative reforms and the use of consultancies. The intergovernmental organizations that are best regarded by governments, such as the World Bank, tend to lean on consultants for policy and programming expertise (Seabrooke & Sending, 2020). Pressures on international public administrations to conform to stakeholder demands have also expanded the use of consultancies, especially within the United Nations system (Stone & Ladi, 2015; Badache, 2020; see Broome, 2022 in this symposium). Many transnational governance initiatives also rely on consultancies to direct how policies are implemented (Seabrooke, 2015; Kentikelenis & Seabrooke, 2021; see also the contributions from Tsingou, 2022 and Willers, 2022 in this symposium).

For many national and international public administrations, consultants act as "change agents," or the "third hand," in transforming what policy should achieve, how work is conducted, and how management is articulated (Christensen, 2005; Lapsley & Oldfield, 2001). The normalization of consultants in public administrations has heightened concerns over the domination of public governance functions by private agents. Many have noted the rise of what Hood and Jackson (1991) call a "consultocracy" where power is exercised by consultancies in an opaque and anti-democratic fashion (see also Gunter et al., 2015; Hodge & Bowman, 2006; Saint-Martin, 2004). The consequence of this consultocracy is that "short-term, outsourced expert knowledge production is increasingly replacing the long-term work of civil servants and even politicians" (Ylönen & Kuusela, 2018, p. 242). From this view, the increased use of consultants diminishes public agencies' planning capacity (Kirkpatrick et al., 2019; Sam & Scherer, 2006).

A further concern here is that while consultants are recognized as "external" advisers, their enlarged role has been accompanied by increased partisan "politicization" in some policy advisory systems (Craft & Howlett, 2013). Consultants can also be instrumental political actors representing particular interest constituencies (Bloomfield & Danieli, 1995; Hodge & Bowman, 2006; Sturdy, 2018). Their influence does not only favor certain interests within countries but also accentuates power asymmetries on a global scale in how knowledge is managed and policy devised and implemented (Boussebaa et al., 2012).

The contributions to this symposium investigate different types of relations between consultancies and public administrations through a series of national and international cases. The articles have different answers to the question of what mediates relations between consultancies and public administrations. Common to these answers are dynamics related to the recognition of ethos, expertise, and status in how tasks are allocated between parties in contracted work. There are some common themes here. The first is the persistent worry that consultancies may affect the ethos of civil service (Maesschalck, 2004). The second is concerned with how expertise is valued, and how the co-production of policies and programs affirms particular forms of expertise (Sending, 2015). The third relates to how engagement between consultancies and public administrations involves status signals linked to who can best overcome uncertainties (Podolny, 2010). After providing some historical context for the contemporary relationship between consultancies and public administrations, the remainder of this article discusses how interactions between consultancies and public administrations can be seen through task-setting around ethos, expertise, and status. We conclude by outlining key points from the contributions to this symposium.

2 | THE EMERGENCE OF THE CONSULTANCY MARKET FOR PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

The logic that sits underneath the market for consultancy to public administration is straightforward: when the benefits of acquiring external knowledge outweigh the costs of producing it internally it makes sense to consult. In some cases, this may be due to the budgetary and hiring constraints of public bureaucracies, where consultants emerge as a solution in performing specific tasks without incurring the costs of hiring permanent civil servants. Here consultants operate as "fire-fighting" agents for public administrations (Craft & Howlett, 2013). In other cases, consultants replicate work done by internal bureaucrats and occupy a "liminal" space (Czarniawska & Mazza, 2003; Sturdy et al., 2006); a space conditioned by the "permanence of temporary services" (Howlett & Migone, 2013).

The emergence of the consultancy market and profession is intimately associated with the role of public administration. McKenna (2006, pp. 17-20, 50) documents how in the U.S. consultancy as a profession was tied to engineers and accountants from the 1880s onwards. These groups were given a significant market boost in the 1930s from public administration demands for a system of third-party checks in finance to ensure there was probity and accountability. Booz Allen & Hamilton and McKinsey & Company both directly benefited from these changes. From the 1950s, Arthur Andersen grew on the back of demands from public administration for antitrust services, especially to prevent IBM from dominating computing systems (McKenna, 2006, pp. 20–23, on RAND see Knafo et al., 2019). In short, the demand for consultancy from public administration came initially from the need to protect against oligopoly in private markets. It is with no little irony that a strong element of the "consultocracy" argument noted above is the presence of oligopoly among management consultancy firms in what kinds of knowledge they provide to public administrations.

We should not be surprised that consultants learned how to organize ongoing demand for their services. Scholarship in the sociology of professions tells us that a priority of professional groups—both in the public and private sector—is to maintain "jurisdictional" control over who can work on what tasks within national and transnational environments (Abbott, 1988; Harrington & Seabrooke, 2020). This includes the expansion of markets into new territories. Already in the early 1970s, McKinsey & Co. made greater revenues outside the U.S. than within it (McKenna, 2006, pp. 248–9). The rise of U.S.-style consultancy in Europe and throughout the OECD occurred through the spread of "scientific management" ideas, including to public administrations (Boussard, 2009; Kipping, 1996). These ideas have been affirmed by what some scholars call "corporate professionalization" (Muzio et al., 2011) or "commercialized professionalism" (Furusten, 2013). Such ideas are also affirmed in transgovernmental policy networks that share a common identity, like the "Anglosphere" (Legrand, 2016).

There has been extraordinary growth of consultancy services to public administrations over the last few decades. Sturdy and O'Mahoney (2018, p. 539) provide an indicator of consulting revenues in 2015, with the United States leading (47.6%), followed by Europe (29.6%), Asia-Pacific (13.7%), Central and South America (4.8%), Middle East (2.4%), and Africa (1.9%). An estimate of the global size of the management consulting market puts it at $977 billion in 2018.[2] The global staff numbers for the Big Four GPSFs—Deloitte, Ernst and Young, KPMG, and PriceWaterhouseCoopers—are somewhere around 692,000+ to 880,000+ professionals (Faulconbridge & Muzio, 2017, p. 221; Murphy et al., 2019). Global consultancy firms like AT Kearney, McKinsey, Boston Consulting Group, and Booz Allen Hamilton are estimated to employ 200,000+ professionals (Faulconbridge & Muzio, 2017, p. 221). For global turnover, the Big Four estimate is $29.7 billion for 2016, with consultancy-oriented firms like BDO and Grant Thornton bringing in $7.6 billion and $4.8 billion, respectively, in the same year (Murphy et al., 2019). The scale and size of the global consultancy market engaging public administrations is maintained through a market in which consultancies and public administrations recognize that the other is useful in establishing what tasks can be performed. This task-setting centers around the recognition of ethos, expertise, and status.

3 | TASKS, RELATIONS, AND RECOGNITION

To think through what mediates relations between consultancies and public administrations, we suggest that there is a micro-to-macro relationship based on common focal points. At a micro-level, relationships between particular consultants and public administrators involve working with symmetric aims based on a common understanding, working asymmetrically where one party gets more than the other, or working anti-symmetrically toward different aims (Martin, 2009, p. 21). As interactions between consultancies and public administration are normalized, those involved have common focal points to provide short-cuts to action, generalizing relations from relationships (Christensen et al., 2022; Martin, 2011). We suggest that for interactions between consultancies and public administrations, these focal points are mainly concerned with task-setting around recognition of ethos, expertise, and status. Task-setting includes how issues and problems are classified and reasoned, including how those involved diagnose, draw inference, and develop treatments for the issue at hand (Abbott, 1988, pp. 39–40). Such task-setting occurs in both national and transnational settings (Seabrooke & Henriksen, 2017).

The process of task-setting is not simply one of determining how to define a problem and act on it, but one where the relations between the actors involved become defined in terms of defining what who has "jurisdiction" over it and thus also a level of authority to decide (Abbott, 1988; Abbott, 2005). This process depends crucially on who is recognized by others as having a claim to control a particular task. Such recognition is not solely linked to expertise or competence, nor to official mandates.

Figure 1 illustrates our conceptualization of this process, highlighting how task-setting is determined by the configuration of ethos, expertise, and status: a consultancy may be recognized as an expert with high status in the market in relation to a particular task, but the resulting substantive control of a task may conflict with the public ethos. Conversely, a consultancy may reflect the dominant ethos associated with a task, and also be recognized as having expertise, but may not be recognized as having a status concomitant with control of the task.

It is important to note that recognition is explicitly relational: you are only seen to fit with the public ethos, holding the right expertise, or having sufficient status if others recognize as such (Sending, 2017). This also means that asymmetries are bound to shape patterns of recognition. While symmetrical aims between the consultant and the public administration are optimal for a good working relationship, we may also see asymmetry where recognition is not reciprocated and creates a form of domination (Martin, 2009). Non-recognition or anti-symmetry is also possible but this, obviously, does not lead to collaborative efforts. The articles in this symposium show variation in interactions around task-setting.

In sum, interactions between consultancies and public administrations center around how status, expertise, and ethos are recognized within the relationship. When aggregated, such recognition becomes an important source of claims to authority, as well as normalized relations that enable governance tools (Broome & Seabrooke, 2021). In general, we can see that consultancies' claims to best practice and access to unique knowledge are recognized by public administrations as a status attribute linked to their market position and global reach (e.g. Jones, 2019; Momani, 2013). Recognition of expertise is not only tied to the analytical and technical demands of the task but also to perceptions of command over abstract knowledge and capacity from cross-organizational experience. There is strong endogeneity between these task-setting foci, as what is seen as a basis for ethos, expertise, and status may change over time. For example, interactions over what task-setting will be recognized as in the public ethos may be

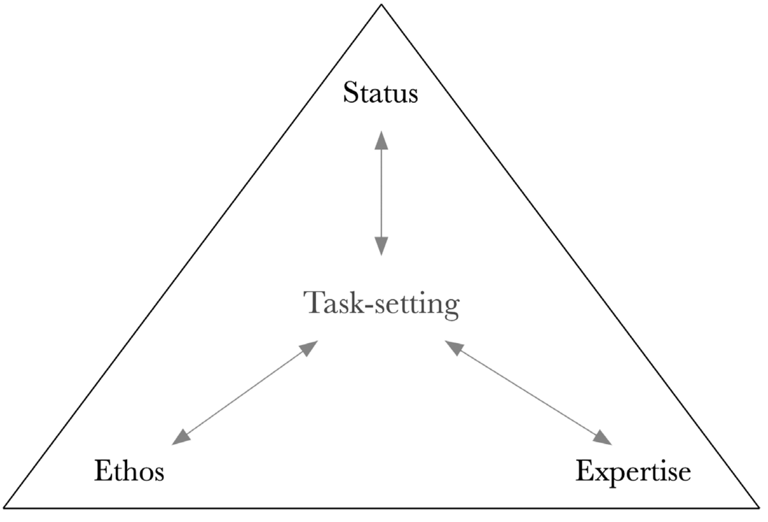

FIGURE 1 Task-setting in consultancy-public administration relations

tied to issues of reputation and status, so that public ethos may be gradually transformed when recognized expertise and status is repeatedly mobilized in a particular direction. Aware of this endogeneity, we provide further details on what is being recognized when consultancies and public administrations interact over task-setting.

3.1 | Ethos

Recognition of who has the right to work in the public interest is a key dynamic in the relationship between consultancies and public administration. Consultants have self-consciously carried business techniques into the agencies of public administration since the 1940s (McKenna, 2006), and since then there has been controversy over whether their activities support or undermine the public ethos. As discussed above, this has been a key contemporary theme in the literature, sparking the term "consultocracy" (most recently Ylönen & Kuusela, 2018). A key thread in this research is the notion that not only are the outcomes of consultancies' engagement with public administration inefficient (Kirkpatrick et al., 2019), but that consultants diminish skill development and the ethos of public servants (Cleave et al., 2019; Theletsane, 2015). A recent interview with Malcolm Turnbull, Australian Prime Minister and pro-business Liberal Party leader for 2015–2018, provides some grounds for alarm:

> One of the big challenges we got in government is that the public service is being deskilled. It's worse in some departments than others. But the consultants, who obviously make a fortune, are really doing—frankly—quite a bit of *damage to the culture of the public service*… those people with those skills and those interests should actually be in the public service. You should be using consultants to do things that are a little bit exotic, where you need specialist expertise.[3]

The fear here is that public servants are compromised in their relationship with consultancies, and that lucrative careers can dissuade those who hear a "government calling" toward public vocation (Vandenabeele, 2008). Turnbull's reference to the culture of the public service follows the classic Weberian separation of bureaucratic agencies (public sector) and enterprises (private sector) by the assignment of official duties, the authority to give commands, and selection of those qualified to execute them (Weber, 1978, p. 956). Those in public service must carry an ethos of public interest. This professional ethos includes valuing "legality, neutrality, equity, and loyalty" (Galwa & Vogel, 2021, p. 4). Research on organizational values among public sector and private sector organizations has shown, at least in the Dutch case, that while both public and private organizations regard accountability, expertise, reliability, effectiveness, and efficacy as shared core values, only the public sector is concerned with "publicness" (Van der Wal et al., 2008).

The broader concern is that permanent close relationships between consultancies and public administrations foster a form of "neo-Weberian" bureaucracy in which the public ethos is challenged (Byrkjeflot et al., 2018). A lack of political accountability is commiserated as a consequence of the "incessant expansion of this gray area at the heart of our democracies," where the public and private are blurred (Vauchez & France, 2020, p. 154). Normalization of this form makes consultancy integral to public management with fewer levels of hierarchy, a logic of market discipline, and the use of project planning and cross-functional teams for implementation (Sturdy et al., 2015, p. 6). In such a system, there is mutual recognition—symmetry—between consultancies and public administrations over who can work on tasks in the public interest. Consultants can be allocated tasks and carry a strong public ethos based on the provision of efficient and effective work in the public interest. Whether the public can change this interaction toward an alternative conception of the public ethos is a different matter.

Another way of considering recognition between consultancies and public administrations on ethos is to question what public values *should* be embraced in task-setting. In contrast to Weberian bureaucracies concerned with efficiency, or NPM bureaucracies concerned with efficiency and efficacy, the "new public service" and "public value governance" literature contends that public values should be determined by the public. From this view, bureaucracies should not operate like private firms, as encouraged by NPM, but should be open to democratic input, with business and civil society actors recognized as "active public problem solvers" (Bryson et al., 2014). In this conception, government is the guardian of public values and those values are informed by civic virtues of duty and responsibility. This includes deliberation so that public administrations are "serving, not steering," thus creating public value (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015). Similarly, research on "co-production" stresses that while NPM had a view of public services akin to manufactured goods, enhanced co-production for public services should include user input (Chauhan et al., 2022; Osborne & Strokosch, 2013). To assist this, bureaucrats should be "entrepreneurial" in finding ways to help citizens be more participatory, even if this highlights tensions over what their roles are and what public ethos is being supported (Lopdrup-Hjorth & Roelsgaard Obling, 2019). Consultants may help facilitate more citizen participation in policy, and in some countries, like Australia, there is a well-developed consultancy market for deliberative democracy where consultants act as impartial process managers (Hendriks & Carson, 2008).

In general, consultancy-public administration relations, be they neo-Weberian or public value-oriented, do raise the question of whether the traditional conception of public ethos is changing. In some countries, there are strong indications that the public ethos has changed from an absolute to a conditional value, where it does not matter who completes tasks in the public interest as long as some justification is made. This, in turn, raises the question of how these justifications are articulated, and how they are recognized by others (see recently Audenaert et al., 2019). As we discuss below, the variation in such justifications and their recognition by significant others are sources of variation in how different national and international public administrations engage consultancies (e.g., Borda-Rodriguez & Johnson, 2013; Momani, 2013).

3.2 | Expertise

The sociology of professions tells us that what counts as—is recognized as—expertise varies not only historically but also between countries (Fourcade, 2006). It typically depends on specialized and technical knowledge, replicated through disciplines, and institutionalized in professional groups that control "jurisdiction" over specific tasks (Abbott, 1988). The role of academic consultants, including in this symposium (Laage-Thomsen, 2022; Raitasuo & Ylönen, 2022), continues this command over expertise through professionalization tied to occupational training and specialized abstract knowledge (Ban & Patenaude, 2019). However, if we are concerned with recognition as a claim to control a task, we need a broader conception. While it is not, strictly speaking, in the eye of the beholder, claims to expertise can be based on a wide array of more or less specialized knowledge, skills, technology or tools (Sending, 2015). Work in the "sociology of expertise" shows how groups can claim authority on tasks from experience rather than formal professionalization (Eyal, 2013). Both abstract and situated knowledge can be deployed to foster expertise in public administrations, including through international training to match bureaucratic roles to tasks (Broome & Seabrooke, 2015).

Public administrations house experts—technocratic civil servants—who seek to control their tasks by asserting both epistemic and formal claims to authority (Littoz-Monnet, 2020; Thiemann, 2019). In recent decades, the focus has been less on how technocrats are technicians and more on the de-personalized establishment of systems where the governing is linked to "technique" (Ribbhagen, 2011, p. 23). This trend is often associated with NPM and, for our purposes, it matters to the degree that it has expanded the demand for generic governance techniques in the form of best practices and performance indicators (see Broome, 2022 in this symposium). An integral part of this trend is that the value of expertise has less to do with knowledge and more to do with providing solutions to on-going problems. For example, the World Bank sought to label itself as a "knowledge bank" from the late 1990s onward—staking its claim to control development issues on its in-house expertise—but has over the last few years sought to shift focus to be a "solutions bank" instead (Bazbauers, 2015; Seabrooke & Sending, 2020).

This broader change in dominant perceptions of how to govern, and what type of expertise is needed, arguably reduces the value of traditional experts or technocrats relative to expertise hailing from experience in working within public administrations across sectors, and across different countries. Consultants are involved in this shifting of expertise from being based on occupational training toward "organizational professionalism" (Faulconbridge & Muzio, 2008; Maestripieri, 2019). They actively create "zones" in which facts are separated from values to support claims of independence and credible expertise (Christensen & Skærbæk, 2010). In short, consultants' claims to solutions rely on them being recognized by public administrations for both abstraction and cross-organizational experience (Momani, 2017). This trend in how expertise is recognized and valued has important effects. One is the notion that long-term permanent staff in public bureaucracies are less able to respond to contemporary policy problems, allowing consultants to position themselves as closest to best practices (Seabrooke & Nilsson, 2015). This denigration of expertise among those with life-long tenure—a Weberian building-block for bureaucratic impartiality—has obvious feedback effects for both recognition of ethos and status (Meyer & Hammerschmid, 2006).

Another aspect of how expertise is recognized between consultancies and public administrations concerns the "liminal" spaces between consultancy and public administration noted earlier, where consultancies working for public administrations morph into a distinct modus operandi. Jones' (2019) recent study of consultants advising Arab Gulf monarchies—where the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Planning is referred to as the "Ministry of McKinsey"—finds that among consultants "a smart survival strategy is not to lie, but rather to say little," while another strategy is "omitting or massaging data" (Jones, 2019, p.18). Research also points to public agencies using McKinsey consultants as expert "system thinkers" able to help internal coalitions go to war with other groups within the administration (Carter et al., 2020, p. 84). Again, there is recognition of expertise being abstract and cross-organizational, while also never completely solving the problem at hand. Their position as "vague experts" allows some consultants to strategically use knowledge to operate transnationally with little accountability (Seabrooke, 2014).

Consultancies actively seek to control knowledge flows to bolster their claims to experience (Kitay & Wright, 2004; Sturdy et al., 2006). This is not only in what knowledge they will or will not share with public administrations (Bortz, 2019), but also the concentration of knowledge flows between offices and subsidiaries. Bousseebaa's research has shown that consultants control of knowledge management systems affirms "neo-imperial" networks, with Western offices viewed as carrying expertise while those in the non-West are "depicted as lacking skill and expertise and thus treated more as recipients than sources of knowledge" (Boussebaa et al., 2012, p. 1238). Moreover, consultancies operating as GPSFs often replicate a dominant Anglo-American understanding of what constitutes expertise and appropriate knowledge through the active hiring of expatriates to control non-Western offices (Boussebaa, 2017).

Variation in how expertise is recognized between consultancies and public administrations will center around who is seen as holding both abstract knowledge and/or cross-organizational competencies. In this regard, the trends in both organizational and corporate professionalization bolster consultancies' claims to access unique knowledge and expertise based on "best practices" that public administrations cannot easily access. The more professional and standardized consultancies appear, and the more their claim to expertise is exclusive—beyond the reach of public administration—the more they are likely to be called upon to analyze and handle a variety of problems. But these trends may not necessarily alter how public administrations regard their own expertise, so this is a matter for empirical investigation.

3.3 | Status

While conceptions of ethos and expertise are central to determining how consultancies and public administration negotiate task-setting, another central factor is the more generic issue of status perceptions. Earlier literature on management consultancy noted how anxieties and insecurities about status were key to relationships between consultants and managers (Sturdy, 1997). Anxieties about how consultants can maintain their elite status when facing clients have also been researched (Gill, 2015). These nerves appear to have settled with greater professionalization and expansion of the market. It is clear that there is now "elite" social status for those employed in prominent consulting firms (Kipping et al., 2019). The trend for former senior public managers to exit public administration and form or enter consultancies is also well-known. This has led to more "revolving doors" not only among senior public managers but also the restructuring of careers in some sectors, making moves between public administration and consultancies commonplace (Seabrooke & Tsingou, 2021; Vauchez & France, 2020).

How is status recognized between consultancies and public administration in a way that informs task-setting? Momani's (2017) research on how management consultancies engage governments highlights four claims made by consultants to reel in business from public administrations: (i) claims to unique knowledge (such as on "big data"); ii) a heightened capacity to identify the "big picture" on issues with high uncertainty; (iii) providing "feel good" positive messaging for problem-solving; and (iv) transforming ambiguity into actionable items that can empower clients. Other scholars have noted cases where public servants feel that consultancies provide their proposals and work with gravitas useful for impression management (Clark & Salaman, 1998; Saint-Martin, 2004). In Sweden, for example, chief executives in public organizations are now more likely to rely on consultants than their junior colleagues to push through policies (Pemer et al., 2020). Evidence also suggests that for some national public administrations, the selection of consultancies is strongly informed by personal ties and price markers, with little concern about operational differences among consultancies (Sporrong, 2011).

Recognition of status is especially important in managing uncertainties. Literature in economic sociology suggests that status is the most likely shortcut for dealing with uncertainty (Podolny, 2010), especially when "[f]uture status and pecuniary gain depend on success in convincing others of one's own assessment of quality" (Beckert, 2020, p. 290). Recognition of who can mitigate uncertainties is crucial, including uncertainty about one's own capacities—*egocentric uncertainty*—as well as uncertainty about the capacities of the other party—*altercentric uncertainty* (Podolny, 2001).

This may be a simple matter related more to professional credentials as status rather than one's market dominance or position within a social network. For example, if a public administration is highly uncertain about its own capacity to assess an engineering problem then it makes sense to outsource to an engineering consultant who has the relevant technical expertise. However, we know that many regular functions of public administration are done by consultants, which suggests that status is more than credentials. Uncertainties over who is to be tasked with work also concerns who is recognized as having access to the best solutions. Momani's (2017) work provides important answers in how consultants create uncertainties for public administrations that they can solve, only to then identify future uncertainties.

On repeated interactions between consultancies and public administrations, sociologists point to how status accrues in markets; that status can be viewed as a "form of institutionalization anchored in sedimentation" (Beckert, 2020, p. 289). In other words, previous recognition from public administrations that consultants have status over "thought leadership," "authentic leadership," and "best practices" further secures their status (Noordegraaf, 2015). We can see this status relationship in the concept of the "managerial missionary" identity among some consultants working for public administration, who think the public sector is 10 years behind the private sector (Galwa & Vogel, 2021, p. 10). We can also see it in "demand inflation" from public administrations to use consultancies to solve public problems (Sturdy et al., 2022 in this issue), including professional views in some countries on who should lead in public-private partnerships (Warsen et al., 2020).

A central feature of status recognition between consultancies and public administrations is that the former have a capacity to solve any problem because of the scale of their transnational networks (which public administrations generally admire, see Hu et al., 2022). This perception is supported by a great deal of activity for status maintenance. This includes the provision of conferences and events to promote future problems (e.g., "megatrends") and foster new networks of clientele (Willers, 2022 in this symposium). It also involves targeted recruitment activities at business schools and universities to foster a perception of elite status, high pay, and thought leadership (O'Mahoney & Sturdy, 2016). This includes promoting the idea that employment in an elite consultancy firm provides a status resource that professionals can leverage later in their careers (Kipping et al., 2019).

In general, recognition of status will vary according to the type of consultancy and public administration. We would expect that national and international public administrations most influenced by NPM are likely to recognize management consultancies as high status and able to complete a range of tasks, even those replicating what is done by the administration. Where this is not the case, consultancies will be constrained to where there is only egocentric uncertainty over technical issues that cannot be handled in-house. Even among intergovernmental organizations with a similar purpose, such as the European Investment Bank and the World Bank, we can see variation in how administrations recognize the status of consultants (Seabrooke & Sending, 2020).

4 | CONTRIBUTIONS TO THIS SYMPOSIUM

The contributions to this symposium explore interactions between consultancies and public administrations in a range of national and international cases. The cases show how variation in relations between consultancies and public administrations matters for who is given control of tasks, and how task-setting is justified. In some cases, consultancies undermine the public ethos, while in others they support it. The forms of expertise vary across cases, from an abstract command of legal and scientific knowledge to expertise based on cross-organizational experience. The status of consultancies also varies, ranging from those known for boutique and specialist work to others who are most known for their global brand. This variation in ethos, expertise, and status is important for policy outcomes and how policies are developed, implemented, and managed in national and international public administrations. We provide brief summaries of the contributions here, linking our thoughts above to the descriptions.

Focusing on Denmark, Laage-Thomsen (2022) traces the emergence of “behavioral insights” as a new form of expertise within public agencies. He compares four agencies where BI has been promoted by academic consultants, who are viewed by some public managers as highly credible on this new science. These consultants claim that BI may establish an empirical platform for the public ethos, with BI as a central government technique. Laage-Thomsen traces how what began as an early “public innovation” model based on social-science insights on nudging and behavioral economics morphed into a “disruption” model based on tech and data-driven innovation. He also shows that it was bureacratic middle managers who supported behavioral insights via academic consultants rather than executive secretaries or ministers. This has implications for how we think of administrative expertise in contemporary bureaucracies, and the role of consultants in facilitating new ways of thinking that change how public agencies view their citizens.

With a case based in England, Andrew Sturdy and team (2022) provide a primarily quantitative study of the effects of management consultancy in the context of the National Health Service. They note how market dynamics can have effects on the ethos of civil servants in bureaucracies, in that the use of consultants feeds more consultants, and that this process favors greater privatization. The status of consultants as problem solvers reinforces this market. Sturdy and colleagues break down these findings to demonstrate that management consultancy use may lead to changes in work practices that increase organizational inefficiency. On this basis, they argue that explanations drawing on transaction cost theory need to be supplemented by incorporating insights from social embeddedness theory to capture how “over-selling” an “over-buying” external consulting can generate sub-optimal outcomes.

With a Finnish case, Raitasuo and Ylönen (2022) analyze the micro-level dynamics of how tax advisory companies draw on the expertise of legal academic consultants to advance their clients' interests. They show how tax advisory firms utilize their access to expert fora to defend their clients' pecuniary interests, detailing how public-interest concerns are marginalized and the interests of tax advisory companies promoted. Through a detailed empirical analysis, Raitasuo and Ylönen show how the market position of tax advisory firms shapes how academic consultants use status and expertise to engage policies and create precedents for particular advantage.

On international public administration, the symposium offers cases on anti-money laundering, cybersecurity, and benchmarking. On anti-money laundering (AML), Tsingou (2022) shows how standards from the Financial Action Task Force have been widely adopted even when they are not legally binding and their efficacy is seriously questioned. She details how consultants are working with public administrations to improve how countries are assessed in peer-based Mutual Evaluations. Tsingou finds that the selection of consultants follows power asymmetries in the system. Wealthier countries choose bespoke consultants who operate in a liminal space, never really inside or outside of the policy process, and able to shape the interpretation of what constitutes effectiveness in the AML regime. Their high status and expertise supports policy "horizon management" and the public ethos. By contrast, developing countries rely on consultants from GPSFs, which engage in "box ticking" that has short-term effects and does not build bureaucratic capacity.

Willers (2022) explores the emergence of a market for consultants in mitigating global cyber risks. He shows how GPSFs have developed market strategies, alongside IT consultants, on the back of calls from intergovernmental organizations to integrate cybersecurity strategies within national security regimes in developing countries. While IT consultants hold the expertise, GPSFs use their status to host and promote events that draw attention from public administrations to use their consultancy services. Willers shows how GPSFs are "seeding the cloud" in creating a niche market to deliver Cyber Capacity Building in a context of uncertainty among governments and public agencies.

Finally, on benchmarking, Broome (2022) explores how consultancies have established themselves as authoritative knowledge brokers for national public administrations on how to align their policies with global performance metrics. He shows how consultants feature as mediators and arbiters between prominent benchmarks that intergovernmental organizations use to rank the quality of countries' business regulations. Broome focuses on Chemonics International—active in over 70 countries—and draws on the example of the Ease of Doing Business ranking by the World Bank. Broome demonstrates that Chenomics's status as the "go-to" consultancy has led to the development of status-based expertise on how to game the system to boost a country's ranking. He also shows how benchmarks like the Ease of Doing Business do not necessarily support public administrations in their own public interest.

This symposium explores how consultancies interact with national and international public administrations. Our analytical framework suggests that if we want to understand interactions between consultancies and public administrations, we can examine recognition over task-setting based on concerns with ethos, expertise, and status. As noted above, ethos, expertise, and status are inextricably linked to each other. Change in how one is recognized is likely to have an effect on the other two. This is especially the case when relationships normalize and assumptions are established as to how consultancies and public administrations should engage one another in task-setting. Our aim here is to provide insights into how consultancies engage public administrations and to identify important trends that are redefining how we govern.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

ENDNOTES

[1] We note that the trend in public administrations to employ more consultants can also be reversed. In contemporary Denmark, for example, ideological opposition from a new governing coalition led to sharp declines in consultancy expenditure from the central government as a matter of policy.

[2] Management consulting: Global Market Opportunities & Strategies to 2022—top opportunities will arise in the financial advisory segment, which will gain $163 billion of global annual sales by 2022. https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20190507005765/en/Management-Consulting-Global-Market-Opportunities-Strategies-2022

[3] 'Malcolm Turnbull on the "cult of consultants," James Riley interview with Malcolm Turnbull for InnovationAUS—Public Policy and Business Innovation, 5 May 2020, https://www.innovationaus.com/malcolm-turnbull-on-the-cult-of-consultants/. Emphasis added.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

No new data were generated or analyzed in support of this research.

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