MANAGEMENT GURUS SELF IMAGES: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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Abstract

This paper explores management gurus self images in Brazil. The academy has plenty of information on how gurus influence audiences, and much has been said about their impact on management fashion and education. However, most articles are based on interviews with gurus’ stakeholders (managers, editors, programs' attendees), and little data has been gathered from gurus themselves. We intend to change this focus, addressing the issue through elite interviews with Brazilian management gurus. We find that much of the literature on the subject is affirmed, and that giving gurus their own 'voice' demonstrates the extent of their knowing and sophisticated self awareness, not least of their respectful rivalry with the academy over authentically useful management ideas. Thus we contribute to the body of knowledge about gurus by revealing their points of view; and we contribute to management practice by giving managers a new perspective of how gurus they hire think.

Introduction

What makes a management guru a management guru? What do management gurus themselves think makes a management guru? What do they think of the concept of gurudom? What do they think are the contextually important factors that impact on guru work? This paper attempts to answer all these questions in relation to management gurus, primarily based on elite interviews with acknowledged Brazilian management gurus. We should say straight away that, while we do explore the Brazilian context itself, our paper is not a piece of Brazilian exceptionality. It is not about gurus in Brazil as compared to those in the rest of the World, but it is about analysing gurus through their own perspective.

The literature on gurus is extensive, although it may be seen as ironic that much of it connects to arguments on fads and fashion. Apart from Clark’s works the fashion for articles on management gurus seems to have faded somewhat after its emergence in the 1980s and peak in the 1990s. The gurus themselves, though, continue to be a presence in the management arena, as our research shows. Among the key pieces on management gurus, Hucynski (1993) provided a taxonomy dividing them in academic, consultant and “hero managers” gurus, positioning them based on their background. According to Abrahamson (1996) gurus are purveyors of management fashions; and indeed he can be seen as a major contributor to a genre which connects gurus to fads (eg Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999). Following another stream several writers have explored the connection between popular management books and gurus (eg Fincham, 1995 and Clark and Greatbach, 2004).

Perhaps one of the most pragmatically useful pieces of work on gurus for our purposes was Clarke and Salaman (1998), because of its thorough review of the state of the art on gurus at that time. They started with useful review of the guru literature, identifying a number of explanations for the guru phenomenon. There were, in order:

- *Psychological explanations* (Conrad, 1985 and Abrahamson, 1996), which saw in gurus an ability to engage with the fragmented and time constrained nature of managerial work.
- *Fitting explanations* (Rogers, 1986), which saw gurus “fitting” with distinctive styles of management learning.
- *Performance explanations* (Clark and Salaman, 1996), which explained the particular attraction nature of gurudom for managers. Guru performance
embodies the “management of risk, promise and opportunity with a particularly highly demanding type of public performance”.

Clarke and Salaman (1998) also cite Huckynski's (1993a) application of Lewin's unfreeze-change-refreeze concept to guru performance. Finally, they explore the relationship of the socio-economic and cultural context in which gurus operate and thrive. Here success has resonances with the broader zeitgeist, possibly with macroeconomic conditions, and/or wider political-ethical projects (for example the enterprise culture in the UK/US in the 1980s onwards). They also acknowledge writers who see correspondences between guru messages and values and core national values, citing Grint (1994).

Clarke and Salaman (1998) went on to challenge this set of explanations they had summarized as too accepting of gurus' content message, and as too dichotomous between producers (gurus) and consumers (managers). Rather, they suggested an alternative position, in which gurus create a particular language that help managers construct for themselves a useful self identity. What gurus do is not so much solve managers’ problems, but play an important part in the social construction of a virtuous, heroic managerial identity.

While seeing value in Clark and Salaman's (1998) reframing of the role of gurus, it is not necessarily contradictory of all earlier theory they summarize. Indeed gurus' roles in managerial identity construction might arguably be facilitated by, for example, the ability to simplify and clarify concepts, or connect to an underlying national zeitgeist as well. This too seems to be acknowledged more in the detailed deconstruction of guru performances in Greatbach and Clark (2002), and their critically revealing account of the production of management books, which too frames gurus as producers.

As we have said, despite the ongoing presence of management gurus amongst us, few others than Clark and his associates have kept study of this important phenomenon going, although two more recent works are worth pointing out. First, David Carlone (2006) should be acknowledged at the very least for keeping the field of guru studies, resonating with Hucynski on Lewin and gurus when it comes to performance. Here, he argues David Covey's performance served to create simultaneous certainty and uncertainty, softening up audiences for change. Second, and the one that has the most direct connection with what we attempt to do here, is Collins’ (2002) challenge to what he calls the self privileging narratives through which researchers represent gurus as fad-mongers. We started our research with an open mind, but our data by the end provided some concurrence with his argument. What we definitely do is rise to his challenge that:

> Rather than seeking to debunk gurus... scholars will make more significant contributions both practically and academically when they seek a more extensive engagement with the gurus of management...” (Collins 2002:35)

We do actually engage with gurus; and we do that by talking to them.

**Methodology**

We were faced with a tricky methodological problem in starting our research process. We wanted to interview gurus themselves, to engage with their subjectivities, particularly about what makes a guru a guru. However, we cannot be completely open about that question if we
are to be able, at the same time, to decide on who is to be included in and excluded from our list of potential research subjects. We hoped our primary source of data was going to be interviews with management gurus themselves, and we had to find a starting point in deciding who to interview, at the same time minimize the impact our a-priori choice might have on our findings. In the end we were able to talk to seven gurus in person, and we subsequently analysed online data relating to eight more.

Our method was twofold. First, appropriating given connections made between gurus and popular management media, we worked from a list of Brazil's Top 10 Gurus from Exame magazine (Cohen, 2004). We were here at least using someone else's representation of who Brazil's gurus were, rather than our own. Second, we turned this problem into an opportunity by asking those gurus we were able to interview to identify who they thought we should talk to (without mentioning the Top 10). This not only provided us with an opportunity to triangulate more recently against Exame's list, which interviewees mostly confirmed, but added names too. It also enabled us in interviews to explore questions of why these suggested individuals did personify gurudom.

Pragmatically this approach was helpful too, in that it enabled us as researchers to complement our cold calling approach to potential interviewees with a snowball technique, asking help in arranging interviews with guru peers. One guru was particularly helpful in this respect, and we found out subsequently that he contacted most of our potential interviewees independently to confirm our bona-fides, and stated his support for our project. As such he might be seen as a behind-the-scenes patron of this research. We have to admit, therefore, it is hard to absolutely distinguish between interviews that resulted from cold calls and those that were snowballed.

On top of all this, it was certainly the case that a standard question posed on contacting gurus: “who else have you already talked to?”. The more interviews we arranged the more easy it became to arrange others – in this sense there was a tacit as well as an explicit snowball. The methodological downside to this was that, in so doing, we may have accessed a particular elite sub-network, the existence of which may at least have been predicated on shared cultural assumptions about the very guru phenomena we were seeking to reveal. Conversely, alternate guru candidates may have been excluded.

Of the initial Top 10 Gurus list, there was no response to contact attempts in four cases. One declined our invitation because, notwithstanding Exame's identification of him as such, he objected to the term “guru” strongly. Our email exchanges with him on this are data in themselves, which we discuss below. Four agreed to be interviewed, and another agreed to be seen in 2007, after the submission date of this paper. Through these interviews another five gurus were identified (snowball). Of these two did not respond to our contact attempts. One initially declined, again because he objected to the term “guru”, notwithstanding his peers' identification of him as such. But he changed his mind after we explained we were interested in the reason for his objection. Two other of these snowball interviewees agreed to be interviewed with no further restrictions. Therefore seven gurus were interviewed altogether, with another interview to be conducted in February 2007.

What all this does is confirmArksey & Knight (1999) on the difficulty to obtain access when interviewing prominent people, and the range of processes which have to be simultaneously put in play to overcome the suspicions of elite interviewees. Zuckerman (1972) notes that elite interviewers must expect to be critically evaluated before the interview happens, and the
process we outline above indicates how far this was the case. For example, one guru required a thirty minute presentation of our research objectives as a *sine qua non* condition for the interview to take place.

In approaching the gurus, our initial letter (Appendix 1) stated the background of the researchers and our general purpose. Once an interview was agreed we sent *ex ante* a list of semi-structured questionnaire (Appendix 2). Early on we had to do a major revision, replacing the headline term “Gurus” with “People Seen as Gurus”, in the light of energetic reservations expressed about the term, discussed below. Documents were made available in Portuguese and in English - it should be noted that Brazil is not an Anglophone country. The interviews ranged from 45 minutes to two hours and were conducted between July and October 2006, and were recorded for later analysis.

Three interviews were conducted entirely in English. In two the questions were put in English and responded in Portuguese, aided by concurrent translation. In this case the gurus had good English and understood the questioning, but felt more comfortable and accurate expressing themselves in Portuguese, without worries about translating. Three interviews were entirely conducted in Portuguese. The English-language interview data was reviewed and summarized individually by each of the three researchers, to identify common themes and issues which we compared, reorganized and reformatted. The Portuguese language interviews were summarized by the two Portuguese speaking researchers and translated by them to English. Review and summarizing were done by making notes from sound recordings, rather than from transcriptions.

As is common in semi structured interviews, it soon became clear that our list of questions was more useful as a framing device that enabled a shared understanding of the kind of issues we interested in, than as a sequence of questions that had to be followed. We were keen that within this broad framework our interviews were able to reframe and diverge from our detailed agenda if they thought it more important to do so, as long as we were addressing the broader questions about the nature of gurudom and its context. However, our taming of the data cannot be claimed to be purely open ended, but a reflection of our a priori interests, and Appendices 1 and 2 can be seen as an expression of this.

All interviews took place in gurus’ own offices. Aware of the literature on gurudom as performance, the researchers also noted their own subjective impressions of the interview as an interaction, and the physical locale characteristics. In this respect we would argue that given the notion of gurudom as public performance, our presence in the guru's personal offices, perhaps facilitated by the testimony of our bona-fides guru patron, can be seen as an invitation to the “backstage”, in Goffman's (1959) terms. Six of the seven places where the interview took place were where the gurus sat and worked, rather than where they necessarily met potential clients. Informality was a main trend: the one interview that did not take place in the work office was conducted in the guru’s house, after the researchers had lunch with him, his wife and his two small kids.

We also discussed, immediately after the interviews, the extent to which, in a general sense, our questions were answered with non-specific, pre-formulated guru-isms. Our subjective perspective is that insofar as this was the case, only one time this was to the extent that certain issues we wanted to address seemed to be evaded (see Morse in Arksey & Knight, 1999, p. 103). As we have said, in this research we were interested in what made a management guru a management guru, what did gurus themselves think made a guru a guru, and the relation
between gurus and the broader context in which they operate. Beforehand we anticipate that our analysis would be solely a summary of gurus subjectivities on these questions, which we intend to connect to the broader literature on gurus. We do come to that summary and analysis subsequently, which we frame in terms of gurus self knowledge and identity construction.

Normative Indicators of Gurudom

In analyzing our data it became clear that we would have to, normatively, identify a cluster of more or less material characteristics which gurus have in common, to a greater or lesser extent. These are summarized in Table 1, along with the initial mode of identification, as far as it is possible to be absolute about this. Once we had been able to identify this cluster of characteristics in relation to the interviewed gurus, we researched the website of the non-interviewed ones, listed on Exame’s Top 10 and/or snowball indications, using the same methods. These are summarized in Table 2.

TABLE 1: Characteristics of Interviewed “Gurus”
Source: authors

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<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>guru1</th>
<th>guru2</th>
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Note ¹: While this guru did few speeches, he had been instrumental in setting up a podcasting portal for managers, so he still performed.
Note ²: Speeches had been a large part of this guru's earlier career, but now he said he no longer made them. At the same time, he told of a forthcoming event where he would be addressing 2,000 people.

TABLE 2: Characteristics of Not-Interviewed “Gurus”
Source: authors

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Our placing of the word guru in quotes is in acknowledgment that there is a further discussion of the somewhat contested nature of guru status. The tables are more or less self explanatory, and much of their data is explored or alluded to in the next section. Some further consideration is, however, worthwhile here. Row 1 identifies the source of guru status and Row 2 shows the extent to which gurus in Brazil are heavily engaged in public performances (cf Huckynski 1993a and Clarke and Salaman 1996a). Rows 3 and 4 show how much gurus are associated with other popular management media (Fincham, 1996 and Clark & Greatbach, 2002). Our identification of these books as bestsellers was through guru personal websites, taken at face value. Row 9 in Table 1 explains how we gained access to the guru.

Given the differentiations made in the literature between gurus and academics, and implicit and explicit debates around their intellectual standing, it is of note that, as seen in Row 5, ten of the fifteen gurus teach at leading business schools in Brazil, although not as tenured professors. Row 6 shows that twelve of them have some management degree, and/or had spent time on specialist study in management at leading schools in Brazil, US and/or Europe. Nine of them had senior level business executive experience, as presented in Row 7. And, as far we are aware age and gender are issues seldom addressed in the guru literature, Row 8 shows that thirteen of the fifteen gurus were over 50, all males. It is arguable that this male domination is true of gurus in the broader world, Rosabeth Moss Kanter perhaps being the single current exception (although from the longer historical perspective there are Lillian Gilbreth, Mary Van Kleeck, and Mary Parker Follett).

Finally, looking at columns rather than rows, there was a debate among us researchers about whether guru1 was really a guru. For one of us, the lack of observed characteristics was balanced instinctively by his very gurulike persona, presence and self-presentation. However, the other two researchers pointed to the data and the paucity of indicators, and that moreover he was one of those who had expressed the most concern about the use of the term guru. As he was a peer nominee, and therefore met a criterion for inclusion we had established, we kept him as part of the group. Beyond that, the three researchers were unanimous that guru1 could be called a “gurus’ guru”. This is one aspect of the question, developed below, about the less-than-absolute nature of guru status and identity.

Gurus Knowing Gurudom

Tables 1 & 2 provide introductory insights, but a far richer picture emerges as we explore the common themes found in our interview data. While these themes are common, though, guru perspectives and experiences relating to them vary. We also have to be aware of the extent to which themes per se are presented here because they were important to us (eg the Brazil context) or to the gurus themselves (eg the reluctant gurudom). The themes overlap. The “reluctant guru” is presented first, because it was the one which emerged first in our research, in cases as a barrier to gaining an interview. Otherwise, the themes are not in order of priority.

RELUCTANT GURUS

All interviewees had been named in the popular management media as gurus, and/or had been named by their peers as such. Yet before and during interviews several times they expressed concerns about the term and its application to themselves. At the same time they were keen to distinguish themselves from mainstream consultants, academic professors, and mere motivational speakers. Guru10, arguably one of the publicly best known gurus through his media profile and engagement with very high profile organizations, refused to see us because
he disliked the term so much, emailing, politely but concisely:

*I am not interested in talking about gurus. I think that I am not a guru and gurus are not a good thing to a population. So this conversation it will be a very short and you know my opinions* (email message from guru10)

Guru10 did offer to talk about other things, but we got no response to a request to do so around why he though gurus were so problematic. As we have already explained, guru1 had to be persuaded to talk to us, notwithstanding his concerns. These initial responses, and the discussions we did have with interviewees, convinced us that the gurus were seriously reflexive about their status and standing. Guru4, like guru10, did not like the association, reasoning his opinion the following way:

*I don’t like the word “guru”, as it does not represent a sophisticated thinker. I need to improvise, to find solutions* (guru4)

Guru2's reservations were for almost the opposite reasons: he felt he didn't match up to those he thought were true gurus, like Porter, Prahalad and, particularly, Peter Drucker:

*I’m not a guru, I don’t want this label of guru. But I feel very good (...) that I can help companies and people in their companies to perform better. It is a very nice thing, a very nice sensation* (guru2)

However, while this opposition to the use of the term was there, it is important not to overstate it. Despite the refusal of guru10 and the concern of guru1, three interviewees did not raise the naming as a concern, all of whom were happy to talk about the nature of being a guru. Even those who expressed concerns affirmed, in some way or other, that they had something of a guru about themselves. Hence for guru4:

*It is important to be famous because this way it is easier to inspire others ideas and feelings. You become famous thanks to the work you have done* (guru4)

Guru2 acknowledged that, despite his concerns, he was seen very much by his peers as a very popular guru. Guru7’s ambiguity about his identity is evidenced in the next quotation, where he is keen to stress that, if he is a guru, he is from a particular kind:

*I don’t think I am a guru. There are some gurus that try to show you the way to do things their way. I am a guru that shows you to do the way you can do it... discover your vocation, quality, ability and be responsible for that* (guru7)

Moreover, the choice for guru7 was because he, literally on his own terms, wanted to differ from the “normal”:

*One of the things that make me well-known is because I talk from my heart, things that comes out naturally. One of the reasons the society is the way it is is because human beings have to choose between being natural and being normal. Be natural is [that] you fall in love with nature, [you] be yourself, authentic, genuine, transparent, being you... being normal is to follow norms of society, pretend, play roles, act the way you think people want. The happiest people in the world are the ones that can be themselves. I was normal, but then I decided I didn’t want that anymore* (guru7)
Guru5, guru6, and guru7, as we see below, produced reflections on what it meant to be a guru, without going out of their way to challenge the concept or their status of gurudom. All thought that there was something special or distinctive about their work, and we explore this in relation to subsequent themes, noting guru5’s statement that:

*Gurus are people that have something to say, that are above or out of the pattern in business or in the academy. Gurus present a different view, they differ from a consultant because of their unconventional ideas.* (guru5)

**PERFORMANCE AND CONTENT**

One of the key ways in which gurus distinguished themselves was their ability to deliver content as well as performance. Part of guru7’s account of his becoming a guru was being able to perform (in terms of presentations) as well as being able to offer ideas that were meaningful to managers. Guru2 spoke of his own research on the subject, which led him to believe that in Brazil there were two kinds of performers: those who had something serious to say in terms of content and those who provided mainly a performance. Guru2 said after each speech he would ask himself:

*How much have you really delivered in content? (…) If I find myself doing more show than content, sometimes I don’t want the money* (guru2)

Others shared a similar vision:

*A motivational speaker is different from a guru in the sense that they are easy to manufacture. All you need is someone relaxed, not inopportune, who can produce an involving speech. In this market you can find magicians, street workers, sailors, sportsmen and artists, all of them presenting a show that is good for conventions and congresses* (guru6).

*Speakers in Brazil are divided in three casts: executives who combine content and experience, thinkers who combine content with intellectual faculties, and entertainers who make people laugh, but with almost no content at all* (guru3)

Guru2 went on to distinguish himself, and those he though of as gurus, from those who were pure motivational speakers:

*I don’t believe in motivational speeches. When people go back to their homes they soon forget what they have listened for that one-and-a-half hours, and this can’t help the company to perform better* (guru2)

But at the same time, he proposes that performance is important as well:

*No one is going to hire me, you know, to de-motivate people* (guru2)

The answer was, he said, to deliver content in a simple, fun manner. Both he and guru5 stressed this relationship between content and performance, simplicity and complexity. Guru2 said that all his books are simple and profound. The statements about the importance of
content along with performance went on:

My success is due to my ability to integrate content, delivering it in a simple way, with humor, in an interactive manner (guru3)

My listeners can say "I was able to understand Nietzsche", because I present Nietzsche’s tremendous ideas into a simple way. People feel good because they can understand it (guru5)

Part of my work is an art. I like to be on the stage, to be exposed. It is a risky activity, and the recipe of my success is aligning five principles: content, context, stage, method and luck… To produce context is an art. This type of speaker has to do a lot of study, [so he] has content and application. There’s space for everyone: the contractor must know what he’s looking for (guru6)

Guru1, guru2, guru5 and guru7 also were keen to stress the extent to which what they offered was designed to meet specific client needs, not a case of delivering an off-the-shelf speech over and over again - although they listed speakers who did that. Often speeches were only part of the guru's repertoires, linked with activities like coaching and/or consulting. What was also very important to the gurus in content terms was their ability to demonstrate organizational and/or management transformation and outcomes. This was the case with guru4 (who, as we have noted, had significantly reduced his speech making), whose modus operandi could reasonably be described as a very high level, highly networked OD consultant. Indeed, all gurus volunteered names of corporate clients where they had been instrumental in achieving organizational and/or personal management development.

GURUS AND THE ACADEMY

Given that the literature framing gurus from the academic side of the fence was quite substantial, we were keen to understand gurus perceptions of the academy/guru relationship. As Tables 1 & 2 show there is a strong institutional connection in Brazil between gurus and the academy, with gurus having studied and taught in leading business schools. What follows adds some detail to our understanding of that relationship. Guru3 states that in the 1970s he did a masters in the US with a world famous strategy scholar (Strategist1):

My undergraduate was in business administration in [Northern Brazil University], followed by a masters in at [USA Institution] in 1973. My supervisor was Strategist1, who I met in [Northern Brazil University] in a lecture on change management. I fell in love with his ideas and went after Strategist1 to do my masters with him (guru3)

For guru6, while professors have to know the state-of-the-art concepts, his challenge was to find and use the concepts that worked in a given organizational context. As observed by other interviewees:

I respect scholars, I taught at [top Brazilian School] and [top US school], but my role is to translate content formulated in the academy in a way understandable for everyone, from a company’s president to the doorman (guru3)

The partnership with universities is not strong, but should be stronger, as consultants are in the middle between the academy and the business world (guru4)
In guru2's life story, teaching at a leading Brazilian University MBA program was instrumental in his development as a guru. His classes became popular, because he was one of the few teachers with executive background, rather than just a scholar. Subsequently, he began to be invited to speak to managers in his students' companies. Guru2 saw himself very much as a teacher still, but at the same time stated that the ability to teach is not enough:

_I know some of my colleagues name themselves “gurus”, (...) but if one day someone looks at me and says 'guru2 is an educator’, I’ll be happy... Brilliant teachers who give brilliant classes sometimes are not enough to make a speaker. Educators, gurus and speakers are different (guru2)_

Guru6 also presented that his position as a non-scholar helped him to call attention and be invited to give classes:

_After finishing my specialization I suggested to my colleagues that we formed a study group, which I then organized. In one of these discussion events the dean of the university saw my presentation and invited me to teach a class at the university... so I continued to work and started teaching at the same time (guru6)_

_Gurus are different from academic professors. Some academics despise gurus, others are in very good terms. Usually gurus have a more diverse thinking, and academics are more Cartesian, due to academic methodologies (guru5)_

A not uncommon theme: while there was respect for scholarship, academy itself was seen as problematic. Guru3 had a feeling of frustration towards academic procedures, shared by most interviewees. In three cases the presence of some kind of obstruction to following the traditional academic path was stated, like in Guru6's account:

_Twice I started a masters, but both times I gave up after struggling with my professors. I wanted to discuss matters.... (guru6)_

Guru2 said that at his present stage in life he didn't have the patience to undertake academic study, mainly after some frustrating experiences. He started his PhD twice at a leading Brazilian school, had all the credits required, but couldn't make it through the “bureaucracy” of writing a thesis. He said to his supervisor:

_Look guys, I have been teaching here for almost 20 years and you are giving me so many troubles that I don’t want it [the PhD] anymore (guru2)_

In exploring gurus explanations of their relation to the academy we have at the same time been addressed their assessments of the way in which they deal with knowledge and ideas, and how they transform and present them. Guru2, who of the interviewees probably was the most extensively and closely connected to other gurus, internationally as well as in Brazil, used the neologism _informediaries_ (ie, mediators of information) to encapsulate the essence of guru work. It is also worth noting that in our “backstage visits” to guru offices, in every case a large and evidently used library of books was visible – ranging from popular to serious management texts, along with highbrow material reflecting particular interests.
THE IDIOSYNCRATIC PERSONAL JOURNEY TO GURUDOM

Emerging here are accounts of the personal journey, sometimes problematic, to guru status. One of our goals was to find out how gurus became gurus, and we asked directly about this. However, within this broader theme there were common unanticipated sub themes. One of these was the gurus’ perceptions of their career paths as unusual, and that this unusualness itself contributed to becoming a guru. One manifestation of this unusualness was having had several different professions or careers:

*My first career was as a psychologist. I started working as a psychotherapist, and later... I did an MBA course* (guru1)

*I am in my third career. My first was as teacher, in a prep course for entrance university examinations. My second was as a doctor, which did not make me happy, so I decided to teach again. But I didn’t want to teach the way I used to do. So I realized I could teach executives, making the experience I had acquired through my life available to the business world. So in my third career I use my three areas of expertise - biology, pedagogy and philosophy - to support a “new vision”* (guru5)

Others, as we have seen, worked both as executives and university teachers. Even where there were not multiple career *per se*, there was often a moment of conscious transformation. Guru3 talks about how he had been outstandingly successful in business, setting up a new operation in the US for a company, achieving its $2.5 bn sales target a year ahead of time, but then:

*Many companies were inviting me to help them as a consultant, and I wanted to go back to my origins to act as a consultant and teacher. I didn’t want the life of an executive anymore, I wanted to do something different, to work on knowledge, on executive training, to write books, to influence. I have always wanted to break paradigms.... I felt I had a solid background on how companies work, so in 1999 I started doing speeches again* (guru3)

Guru7 phrased a similar transition in terms of his own guru-philosophy:

*How did I leave [being Managing Partner of Global Consultancy in Brazil]? I didn’t leave, I entered my own company, I opted. I said “enough of reactivity”. I wanted to be proactive, to be natural, to live my life. When you take a proactive action, based on self knowledge, the universe conspires* (guru7)

The other important sub theme in terms of the journey was episodes of particular personal difficulty, the need to have had hard experiences life, along with its ups and downs. Guru6's commitment to learning and work led to his divorce, along with a statement that “I have had a very difficult life”, presenting his journey from the working class to gurudom. Guru7's life too was one of struggle and achievement, presented more positively, but not an easy route. On the same path, guru4 started working at 14, and guru3 was:

*I’m the son of an uneducated fisherman, who learned how to read and write when he was 25 years-old. My father is an example of breaking paradigms, as he first learned to read and write in English to work as a salesman in a shop visited by lots of American sailors. This was a way to differentiate himself...* (guru4)
Guru2 had a life threatening illness, which caused him to reassess his priorities, switching his career from being the CEO of a major blue-chip to become, in his terms, an educator. Guru5 summarized a common tacit and explicit position:

\[
A \text{ guru is someone with experience, that's had his ups and downs. There’s no guru younger than 50 (guru5)}
\]

**Conclusion**

In rising to Collins (2002) challenge, we would argue that revealing and sharing our data is worthwhile in its own right; but paradoxically, we see the need to make further argument to explain why we think this is the case.

Ours was a very rich dataset. The themes we have identified, and the content within them, are both quantitatively and qualitatively a reflection of the key issues that emerged at the interviews. This is not to say there is not further data that could be usefully shared, nor that there might not be further iterations. In particular, there was a theme about guru’s business model excluded from consideration here because of space reasons, and because it was actually the hardest topic on which to generate interview data. There is important information there, though, which will be dealt in another opportunity. And, after all, we have in fact confirmed, in our research, some of the underlying arguments or points made in the guru literature.

First, Brazilian gurus narratives of overcoming problems confirms Clark & Greatbatch (2001) idea that uncommon stories provide an opportunity for gurus to establish the authority of their claims, demonstrating the factual basis of their ideas and their own unique insight. Second, the arguments that gurus simplify complex ideas to something more consumable, to meet particular needs, be it contextual or to do with learning styles, as proposed by Hucynski (1996) and discussed by Clark and Salaman (1998) is confirmed here. Third, the material on performance and orality (see Carlone, 2006) and on perceptions of risk and guru performance is confirmed. Other authors’ views are confirmed in a number of opportunities, including, but not limited to: the connection explored by Micklethwaite and Wooldridge (1996) and Greatbach and Clark (2004) about popular management books; or Hucynski’s (1993) taxonomy of gurus.

And clearly the gurus themselves had an analysis of the relation between them and their social economic context. That these analyses and understandings were so well framed, we argue, is in itself our major finding, the reason why we feel that giving gurus’ voice in the academic literature has been important per se. Gurus were given an opportunity to express their views about their role in the management arena, presenting their own opinions on this phenomena as a counterpart to indirect analysis.

We were initially tempted to develop a conceptualization of our material as complementing Salaman and Clarke (1998), this time in relation to their key message about identity formation. But for us the most interesting finding is not that we have uncovered how guru identity formulation might work, or affirmed much of the literature on guru theory. It is that, we suspect, if we were to put our theorization of identity to the gurus interviewed, their response would be “yes, you are telling us what we know already”.

Likewise, we argue, what should be seen as remarkable and cause for further reflection is not that, in many senses, the gurus triangulate what the literature on them says. But rather that
gurus knew and were happy to admit large elements of what the academy presents, unbeknownst to them, as “findings” about gurus. The wind is taken out of the sails of some, but not all, of the critiques of gurudom. This is done while gurus recognize a relationship, however respectful with the academy, where there is some contest over what is proper and useful management knowledge. This cross-reflexivity has not been reciprocated in the academy's literature yet.

In a sense, it might be argued that, unwittingly, the gurus researched here are requiring academic scholars to raise their game. For critical scholars, among whom at least one of us is numbered, it is not enough to deal solely with what we have seen as problematic aspects of guru performance – say simplification, appeal to the affect, performance valorization. We have to address the reasons why gurus, and one suspects managers, attach real positive value and at the same time problematize them. Indeed, there is a deliberate irony and ambiguity in our title, reflecting our belief that the important contribution this paper makes is not merely to what we know about management gurus; but that management gurus themselves have a very knowing understanding of gurudom.

REFERENCES


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Appendix 1

[BRITISH UNIVERSITY ]

RESEARCH ON BRAZILIAN MANAGEMENT GURUS

Invitation

[Prof. ], head of the [an area of studies] at [British university], and visiting professor at [Brazilian University], invites you to be part of a selective research project on Brazilian Management Gurus. The objectives of this work are to: introduce the scale and scope of your activity to European audiences; understand how professionals become gurus; and share views of how to develop and sustain guru status.

The research involves an open, semi-structured interview, oriented around the issues below, which will last for around one hour. We would very much like your permission to record and transcribe the conversation, assuring you confidentiality, the chance for you to review the transcript, and ethical utilization of all data acquired (we would be happy to answer any specific questions or answer any concerns you have on this). The outputs of this research will be first presented to the participants, and then published in national and international publications and management media.

We thank you for your cooperation and hope to establish contact soon!

Orientation Issues

1. Becoming a management guru in Brazil:
   - Personal history of achievements.
   - Core messages presented to audiences.
   - Similarities and distinctiveness of Brazilian gurus.
2. Enhancing guru status:
   - Actions to maintain guru status.
   - Development of broader business activities.
   - Questions about longevity and legacy.
3. Gurus in Brazil
   - Views about why there is a Brazilian guru sector (Britain has only one guru).
   - The particularly Brazilian aspects of how gurus work (eg compared to the USA)
   - Gurus’ attitudes to the concept of “gurudom”.
4. Relationship with the academy.
Appendix 2

Semi-Structured Interview Questions
These questions are a guide only. We would ask your permission to record and transcribe our discussion. You will be provided a copy of your comments to add to and correct if you wish. We would like to identify you as one of the gurus interviewed in any research publications, with your permission. We would also like permission to use verbatim quotes from this and further interviews, but on a non-attribute-able basis.

Becoming a management guru in Brazil
- How did you become a management guru
- How do you feel about being called ‘a guru’
- What were the key events and critical incidents along the way
- Was there a morning you woke up and suddenly said, ‘hey, I am a guru?’ Was it deliberate or emergent?
- Was anyone else involved (e.g., was it a solo endeavor or were there other key individuals involved?
- What did you do before you were a guru?
- What is it that makes a “guru” a “guru”, (a) generally (b) in the Brazilian context
- What are your key achievements as a guru
  - What of these is distinctively “you”
  - What of these is distinctively Brazilian

Enhancing guru status:
- Once you have reached the status of ‘guru’ what do you do to maintain that status
- How do you keep your message fresh while maintaining your identity
- Is it desirable to leverage other business activities onto your guru status -examples
- What is your relationship with other gurus – in Brazil – in the world
- Do you have concerns about longevity and legacy.

Gurus in Brazil
- Why do you think that there is a distinctive guru sector in Brazil, compared to the US, where there are many, and the UK, where there is maybe only one
- What are the intellectual and professional traditions you draw upon these
- What part of what you do draws on themes and traditions which are Global, from the US, from Europe and from Brazil
- From anywhere else in the world
- What, from your point of view, is particularly Brazilian about the way you work

Relationships with Business Schools and the Academy
In the UK and Europe at least there is an emerging literature by people in Universities and Business Schools on gurus.
- Looking the other way round, how do you see that sector
- What do you think that you do as a guru that is different/better/worse than the Business School people

Are there important things we have missed, questions we have not asked?