Consultants in academic libraries: library literature meets the voices on the ground

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outline

- Part 1 results
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  - Methodology
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- Conclusions

Part 1 findings

- Everyone is hiring consultants & no one is talking about it.
- The discourse that does exist glosses over basic facts and lacks critical analysis.
- Common tropes normalize the practice & disempower library workers.

Part 2: method & methodology

"Critical realism aims at explanation: at explaining social processes and events in terms of the causal powers of both **structures** and **human agency** and the contingency of their effects." (Fairclough, 2005, p.923)

Studying organizations using critical realism : A practical guide

|	
empirical	• Students & teachers interacting
entities	• Students & teachers • class rooms • books • rules
mechanisms	• Socialization, learning, power relations • rule creation & enforcement, communication
structures	• State ideological power, school organization
explanation	• State ideological power is begin exercised

details on p.17 table 1.1

Part 2: Data analysis

Respondents by role

	College	University	Consortium	Totals
Administration (n=21)	10%	90%		11%
Library Workers (n=168)	11%	87%	2%	89%

Respondents by province

Province	Administation (N=21)	Library workers (N=158)
AB		20
BC	9	49
MB		8
NB	1	1
NFL		3
NS	1	11
ON	8	58
PEI		1
QC	1	7
SK	1	

Has your library hired a consultant?

All respondents n=189
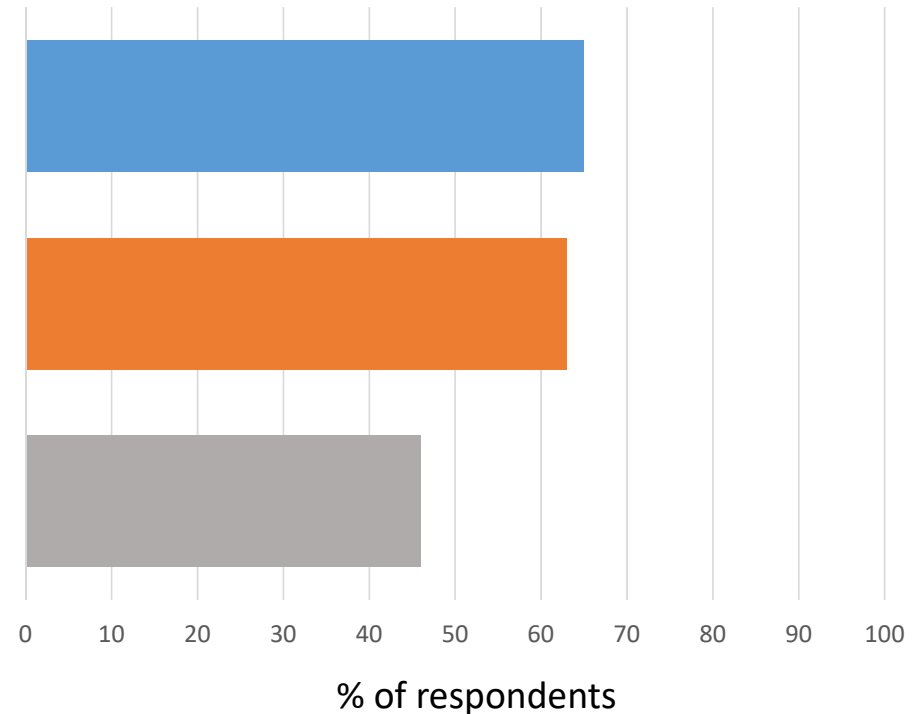

- Yes 121 (64%)
- No 28 (15%)
- Not sure 40 (21%)
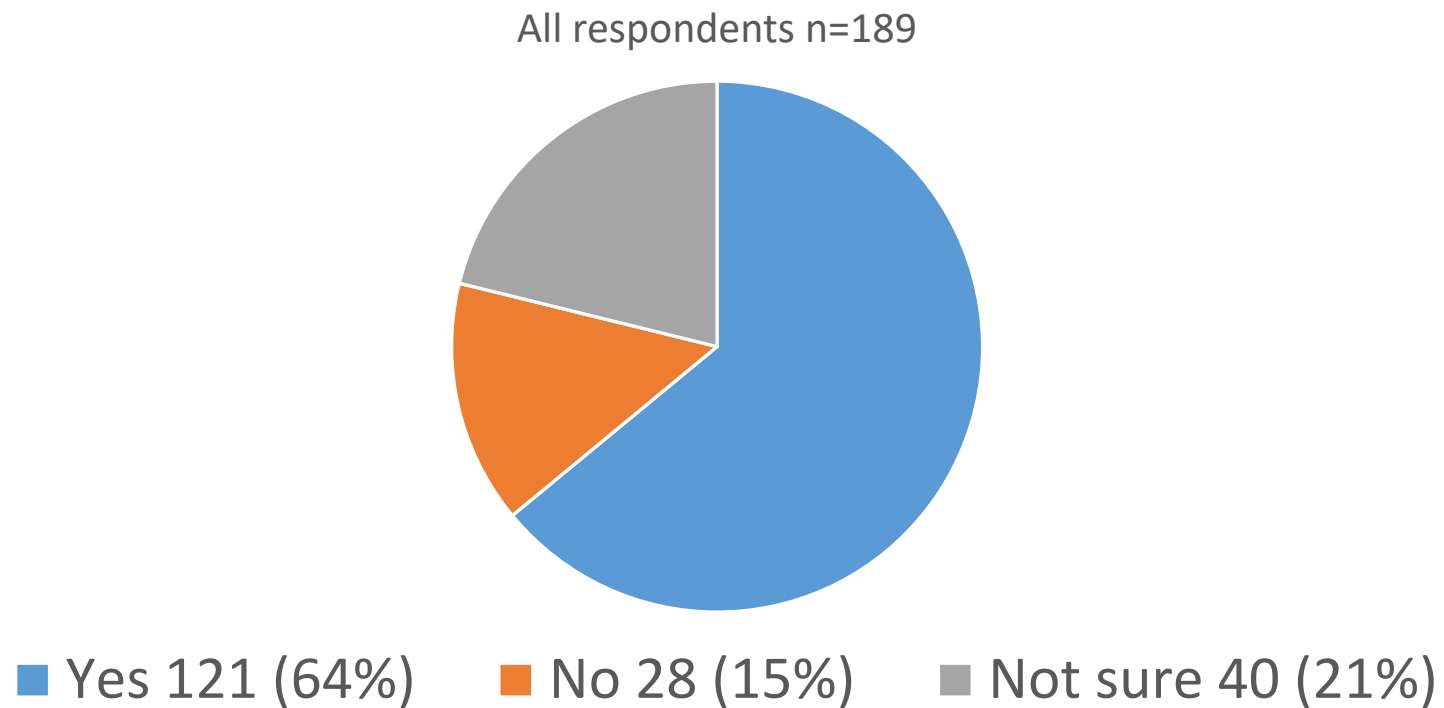
Why are consultants **not** used?

- Not a common practice at library 16 (57%)
- Too expensive 14 (50%)

Why **are** consultants used?

1. to provide guidance for decision making
2. knowledge not held by employees
3. to lend credence to a course of action

top 3 reasons
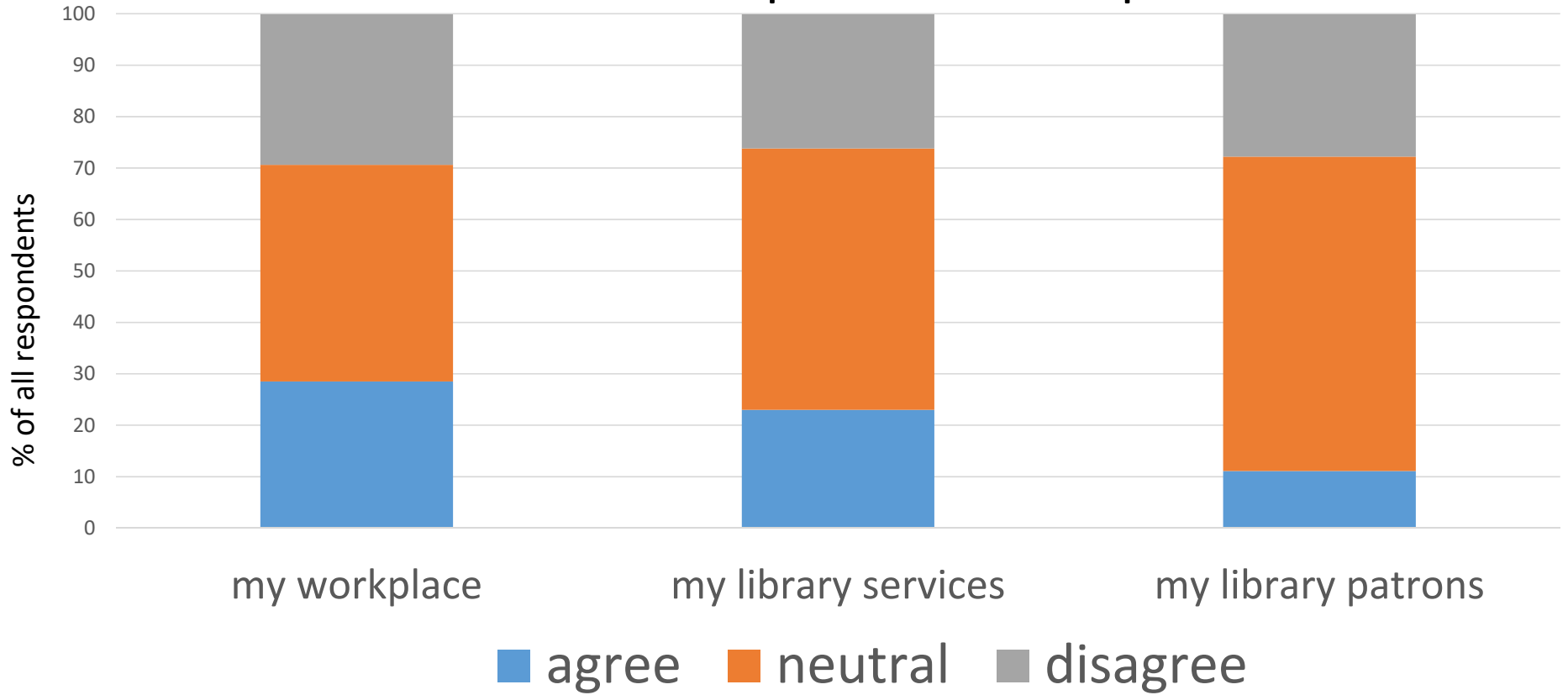

% of respondents

What are consultants used for?
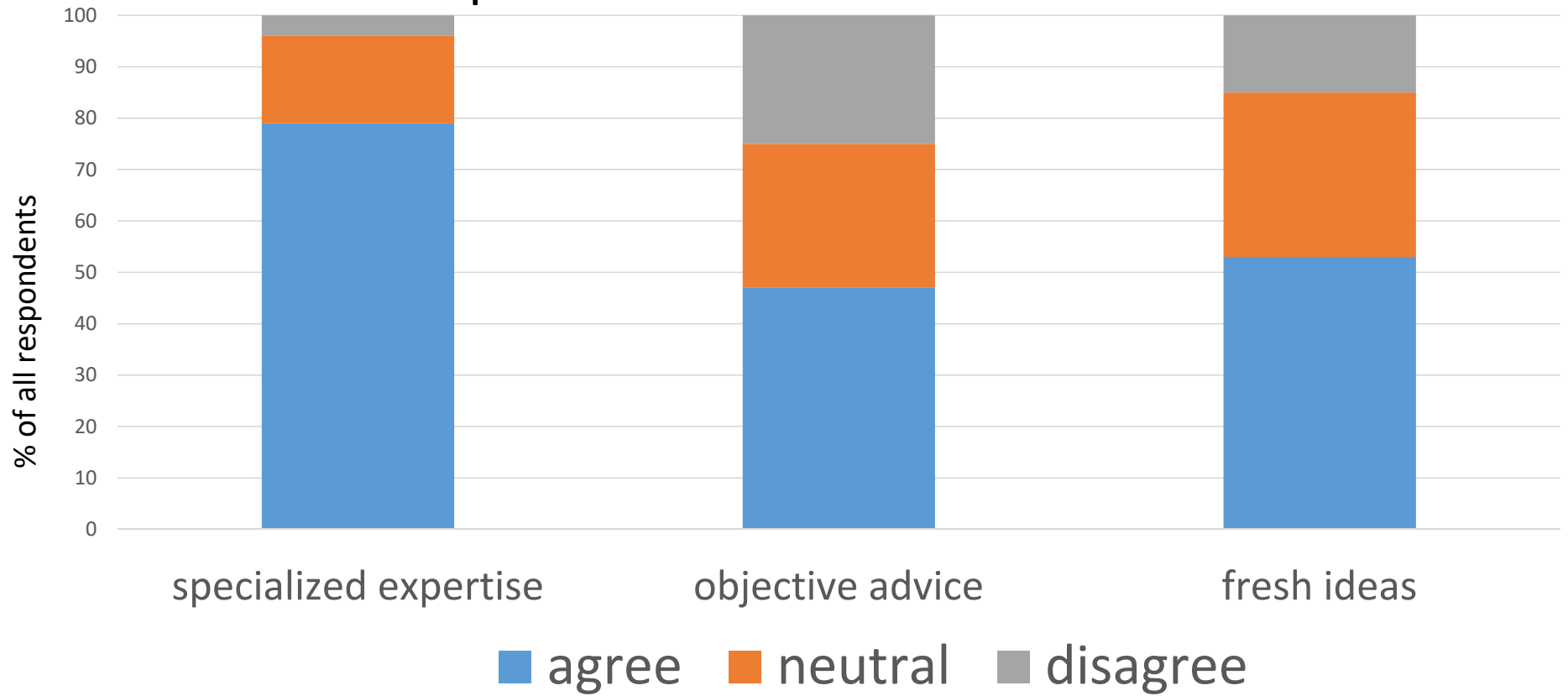
Space planning 72%

Strat planning 64%

Change management 48%

Staff reorganization 46%

The consultant had a positive impact on…

Consultants provide...

Qualitative data

- Structure (neoliberalism)
- Power (of administration)
- Agency (empowering, disempowering)

Structure (neoliberalism)

"consultant work has grown out of a business model where profit [motive] is the leading logic. Consultants in this instance don't bring fresh ideas; they bring capitalism. The academic library I work in and almost all libraries do not generate profit and so this ideology is counter to the very being of libraries. I would love a consultant that was an anti-capitalist library advocate."
- Librarian

Power (of administration)

"Consultants are not necessarily objective. They may consciously or unconsciously provide solutions/ideas that are in line with management/administration's desires. After all, that's who's paying the consultant fees." - Systems Administrator

Power (of administration) cont...

"Use of consultants is a management technique to effect change without management having to take responsibility for the change. Most believe the outcomes are foregone conclusions, already decided on by management, [they are] using the consultant to give the illusion [of] staff participation." - Department Head

Power (of administration) cont…

"My perception of consultants is that they fulfill a management objective and so the value for participants is chiefly symbolic." - Librarian

Agency (disempowerment)

"The practice of hiring consultants in general has made employees feel insecure, distrustful of administration, concerned for the stability of their positions, and cost a good deal of time with very little outcome. The practice of hiring consultants has in general had a negative impact on the culture of my workplace. It has contributed to low morale." - UL

Agency (disempowering) cont...

- "Staff seem to feel that we are being asked for feedback but that the ask for feedback is superficial - it's pandering. Decisions have already been made." - Library Assistant
- "Many of the librarians commented on why we bother with consultations if they don't listen anyway." - Librarian
- "The person's expert opinion was valued over the knowledge and experience of the people in the library." - UL

Agency (empowerment)

- "It has made our workplace more of a team based workplace. People are more respectful of each other." - Librarian

- "It can be energizing and helps us to break out of entrenched patterns of thinking." - AUL

- "Expanded my understanding of areas in which I have worked with them; allowed the library to move forward in areas where we lacked in-house expertise." -UL

Domains of work

| Space planning | IT | Technical projects |
| Strategic planning | HR | Librarian work |

Domains

"I don't have the skills to work as an architect and I don't think that I should have these skills. It makes sense to bring in consultants for these kinds of tasks. On the other hand, I think it is very problematic for consultants to be brought in for things, such as strategic planning or reorganization." - Librarian

"Those who offer truly specialized skills (architectural design, IT) bring real value to an organization. I have less confidence in those who are hired as experts in strategic planning or change management who have little understanding of the organization and no real stake in the outcomes once the final report has been filed." - AUL

Findings

- Balanced view of the practice, lack of critical engagement.
- Respondents critique focused on the exercise of power by administration.
- Individual agency is impacted (both negatively & positively) by the practice.
- Criticism of consultants for internal matters & librarian work.

Conclusion

"The ability to engage in explanation and causal analysis (rather than engaging in thick empirical description of a given context) makes Critical Realism useful for analyzing social problems and suggesting solutions for social change" (Fletcher, 2017, p.182)

bibliography

- Edwards, P., O'Mahoney, J, &, Vincent, S. (Eds.). (2014). *Studying organizations using critical realism : A practical guide.*Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Fairclough, N. (2005). Discourse Analysis in Organization Studies: The Case for Critical Realism. *Organization Studies, 26*(6), 915-939.

- Fletcher, A. (2017). Applying critical realism in qualitative research: Methodology meets method. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology, 20*(2), 181-194.