

ACCOMPLISHMENTS IN CONSULTANCY WORK: AMBIGUITY AND DISTRIBUTION OF PRAISE AND BLAME

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Session A-2

Abstract

The paper addresses management consultancy work based on a case study of a relatively large assignment involving several consultants and client personnel. The people involved produce very diverse accounts of the process and outcomes. They use a variety of criteria for success. The paper emphasizes the need to take pluralism of consultant as well as client groups into account to understand the ambiguities, complexities and conflicts of consultancy work. The study indicates a strong need among participants for distributing praise and blame – for blaming the other and praising oneself. One can understand this as fulfilling emotional, political and identity-supporting functions. Talking about the other in a particular way can be therapeutic as well as reinforce one's career prospects. The tensions and conflicts as well as diversity of experiences and reports in the case study indicate a need to reconsider some ideas in the literature on the smooth interaction and consensual relationships in consultancy work.

Keywords: Consultancy work, politics, ambiguity, client relations, blaming.

Accomplishments in consultancy work: ambiguity and distribution of praise and blame

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The paper addresses management consultancy work based on a case study of a relatively large assignment involving several consultants and client personnel. The people involved produce very diverse accounts of the process and outcomes. They use a variety of criteria for success. The paper emphasizes the need to take pluralism of consultant as well as client groups into account to understand the ambiguities, complexities and conflicts of consultancy work. The study indicates a strong need among participants for distributing praise and blame – for blaming the other and praising oneself. One can understand this as fulfilling emotional, political and identity-supporting functions. Talking about the other in a particular way can be therapeutic as well as reinforce one's career prospects. The tensions and conflicts as well as diversity of experiences and reports in the case study indicate a need to reconsider some ideas in the literature on the smooth interaction and consensual relationships in consultancy work.

Introduction

Management consultancy is a large industry and an economically significant activity. It has expanded rapidly over the latest decades. Consultancy firms influence the organizations they serve but also exercise a wide indirect influence as they are central in the development and dissemination of management ideas and frequently are used as models for other organizations, e.g. as examples of organizations with ambitious HRM and knowledge management systems.

As one may predict there is a wealth of academic studies on management consultancy – the expansion of the consultancy industry has been followed by a parallel expansion of the consultancy research industry. The fashionability of this research is well motivated. Many aspects of management consulting have been covered: its history and development, the ideas, language use and knowledge base, its occupational status, its relationship to management fashion, the management and organization of consultancy firms, etc. Despite all this, there is very little research on what consultants actually do and what they accomplish (exceptions include O'Shea & Madigan 1998). These are core aspects of management consultancy and it is a great flaw that we lack good research on aspects such as the specific nature of consultancy work, its accomplishments and how client-consultancy relations look like. There are interesting discussions available, but these may be speculative in the absence of empirical work.

We see two basic reasons for the shortage of in-depth studies of management consultancy. One is academics' inclination to emphasize abstract ideas and texts and a strong tendency to look for the most easiest available empirical material, such as ideas and theories published and marketed by, or in other ways easily associated with consultants, such as

management fads and fashions. This also fits well with the academics (our) speciality in critically scrutinizing flawed ideas and may for many of us, including the authors of this text, offer the satisfaction of getting back to a group that we sometimes tend to have some negative feelings about – there is a rivalry between ‘serious’ management researchers (like the present authors) and consultants. Associated with this (over) emphasis on espoused ideas and labels is an inclination to assume that this level of the espoused tell us that much of what actually takes place in consultancy practice. Consultants’ practices may, however, be loosely coupled to fashionable labels and theories (Benders & van Keen 2001). The other reason is the difficulties in getting access to in-depth studies of consultancy projects. It is very difficult to be allowed to follow consultancy work at any depth or even to get access to interviewing consultants as well as client personnel after the completion of a project. Consultants tend to be secretive – something that may reinforce the suspicion of academics.

In this paper we report a study of a management consultancy project, based on interviews with consultants and client personnel after the completion of the project. The study falls short of the ideal of following a project at close range over time, and the empirical base is fairly limited, but it still contributes to illuminate some key aspects of management consultancy work.

In the paper we explore how consultants and client managers view – or at least talk about – the outcomes and the responsibilities and reasons for accomplishments and shortcomings of the project. In particular we investigate the constructions of praise and blame in work of consultants and their client organization.

The paper aims at illuminating several key themes around management consultancy work and consultant-client relationships:

- the (ir)rationality, politics and confusions of consultancy work
- issues around success and criteria for assessment, including ambiguities of project outcomes
- the variety of meanings in the consultant-client relation, including in terms of attributions of responsibility for progress as well as problems
- difficulties in on-site marketing of consultancy services; tensions between doing contracted work and finding additional assignments
- the consultancy project and complex consultant-client relationships as an occasion for identity work
- the gendered meanings of this relationship

Apart from these ‘substantive’ areas we also aim to say something about the methodology of studying contested and ambiguous phenomena – and perhaps increase the sensitivity to consider phenomena in these terms.

The paper is structured as follows: We start by a review of the literature on management consultancy, followed by an account over methodological principles and a short presentation of our approach. The following section introduces the consultancy project. We then give space to the people closely involved in the project –consultants and client personnel. We start by a detailed presentation of the participants’ accounts of what happened and why so was the case and subsequently summarize, interpret and compare the various views of the project’s outcomes as well as how praise and blame are distributed. We then interpret this on a more ambitious level, before summarizing and further discuss our results in the conclusion.

Research on consultancy

As mentioned, there is a wealth of academic literature on management consultancy. We here disregard the normative and technically oriented literature that prescribes how consultancy should look like and typically includes success stories, in which the author him- or herself frequently has been involved. As will be clear from our study, the perceptions of those involved in consultancy projects may differ considerably, and one cannot assume that one involved party will produce accounts that are confirmed by others.

One broad camp – often addressing broader or similar fields as management consultancy (e.g. communication or OD specialists) – assumes a certain level of rationality and ‘value-creation’ as a key element in ‘normal’ consultancy work. This assumption may be implicit. The wealth of studies focusing on knowledge in e.g. consultancy and other professional service firms often display an impression of actors being capable of delivering something valuable. They create value through esoteric expertise, they are knowledge systems, they solve problems, they act as knowledge-brokers, the literature reports (e.g. Löwendahl 1997; Sarvary 1999; Werr & Stjernberg 2003). The view is of a professional helper – similar to the physician – aiding those in need of help (Schein 2002).

There are sometimes references to the market – the expansion and high fees paid to consultants are proofs on value creation (e.g. Poulsen 1999). Why should clients use and re-use consultants and pay them high fees if they don’t get value for money – problems solved, costs cut, new business opportunities detected or more profitable strategies thought out and/or implemented?

A second camp is characterized by sceptics emphasizing ambiguity of work and performances (Alvesson 2004). The sceptics do not accept the market argument, arguing that it is uncertain what clients get from consultants (Ernst & Kieser 2003). Institutionalists like Meyer & Rowan (1977) would argue that clients use consultants because others do – consultants means legitimacy and/or the reduction of cognitive uncertainty. How rhetoric and use of labels are significant in consultancy work are also pointed out by moderately sceptical researchers (Alvesson 1993; Clark 1995; Czarniawska-Joerges 1990). Sharma (1997) makes the point that the market is highly inefficient for professional services – quality of services are not easy to assess and there is seldom any communication of experienced outcomes between clients so it is difficult for the market to react ‘rationally’. Reputation, image and personal relations may matter more than quality of services (Clark 1995).

A third broad camp go much further in their scepticism and view management consultancy as having little to do with positive effects on business, and not being relatively harmless (as institutionalists indicate) either. Instead management consultants are indicated to often do more harm than good. Unflattering metaphors such as witch doctors are being used (Clark & Salaman 1996). Politically minded commentators would say that managers like consultants because they are a useful resource in political battles in organizations – the outcome of this political support may or may not be beneficial for profits, but primarily they are beneficial for the top figure hiring the consultants (Jackall 1988). Most common here is to emphasize the flawed nature of consultancy knowledge and the irrationality of client’s interest in these (Salaman 2002) and a strongly asymmetrical relationship in which the consultant is powerful and rhetorically skilled, while the client is passive and dependent

(Clark & Salaman 1998). Consultants' ideas and recipes are superficial and unsound – they promise much more than they can deliver. Many authors have linked management consultancy to fashions (Jackall 1988; Nohria & Berkley 1994). Fashionable ideas often trigger quick and superficial change initiatives – initiatives that cost money and create disruptions – which are then not seriously implemented as they are not thought through carefully and are disabandoned when a new wave of ideas and concepts get people to jump on the bandwagon (Jackall 1988; Pinault 2000; Ramsay 1996). In his account of work in several well-known consulting companies Pinault (2000) reveals how the interests of clients is subordinated to the interests of the consultant companies by the help of empty concepts and frameworks and even sheer deceptions. In a study of some major management consultancies and some of their less fortunate projects O'Shea & Madigan (1998) emphasize and to some extent demonstrate that these firms not seldom cost their clients a lot of money and sometimes even contribute to their ruin.

The critical studies tend to emphasize the significance of the power base of the consultants – partly contingent upon the persuasive powers of the new recipes for 'leading edge management' – and the uncertainty and weakness of the client, experiencing a need of expert advice to getting on track. There is a literature on the anxiety of clients and fashion-sensitivity associated with the use and significance of management consultancy (e.g. Sturdy 1997). This view of the powerful consultant is to some extent shared by critics and many researchers viewing consultants as professional helpers, similar to physicians. A few studies question this view, arguing that consultants are often marginal and dependent on their clients and that in any internal power struggle the consultants are likely victims, 'brought in to deflect blame and marginalized in any heavyweight political contest' (Fincham 1999a:6).

Most texts in this area have emphasized that consultancy work follow fairly clear operating logics (e.g. delivering expertise service, marketing fashions, supporting the political interests of the client) and outcomes (positive, ambiguous or problematic results). Our study shows the great variety in terms of success criteria and ascriptions to various involved parties for blame and praise. We connect to many of the themes surfaced in this literature review, e.g. ambiguity, symmetries of consultant-client relations, the politics of consultancy work, but avoid for the moment making strict linkages between the existing literature and our empirical study, preferring a fairly open treatment of the latter. This is facilitated by a relatively limited empirical base, making it possible to rather closely follow the accounts of the interviewees without structuring the material carefully through specific research questions and theoretical/analytical themes for inquiry. We see it as a clear advantage that we can present the 'stories' about the projects of various authors rather than highly structured – and thus fragmented – interview statements.

Method

We mentioned access problems as one explanation behind the shortage of studies looking more carefully at management consultancy work. While we, in research projects in general, have encountered very few constraints in doing ethnographically oriented in-depth studies of organizations, we have had problems in getting access to consultancy work situations and to talk with both consultants and clients about projects. Consultants typically say that they can't provide access because of considerations of confidentiality on behalf of the clients, but we have the impression that consultants are often not so eager to let researchers scrutinize their work and outcomes. Given the somewhat negative nature of a lot of research, they may have

good reasons for that. Even though it is doubtful to what extent they are familiar with critical studies, it is well known that there is a widespread scepticism against consultants.

In the present case, we were so fortunate that two large 'knowledge-intensive' firms that we – in independent projects - were conducting in-depth studies of had a joint project. We could thus get access in both organizations, although the consultancy firm was instrumental in this respect – partly through giving us the information about the project and also in asking the key people in the other organization about their acceptance of those conducting the study.

We then interviewed the three consultants and three managers of the client company that were most centrally engaged in the project. (Unfortunately, in one of the interviews with the consultants, the tape-recording did not work, so we are only using parts of this interview.) We also talked with another manager, located at the end user pole, from the client company. Most interviews lasted about 90 minutes. This may seem as a very limited material, but it covers all the key participants and may still allow us to make interesting and fairly well supported points. We have little doubt on that, as the interview material in many ways is very clear and forms a fascinating mix of supported and mixed accounts. We are certainly aware of problems with overgeneralizing from or draw premature interpretations from a small material, but qualitative research is not primarily to be assessed on the size of the empirical material. Limited material can allow rich interpretations. It is partly a matter of the richness of the material. As we have conducted two ambitious case studies of the two organizations involved – each comprising around 50 interviews and observations of a number of significant situations – we have some qualified pre-understandings of the sites reducing the risk for 'tourist' research. We will, however, only marginally draw upon this broader material.

Our interviews were open in the sense that we asked the informants to talk about the consultancy projects without providing too many hints of what we were after or to cover a check-list. We were interested in how they reasoned and were more eager to get some unexpected responses than to check specific hypothesis drawn from literature review. This easily leads to some empty holes in the accounts, but increases the chance of getting some novel insights.

Our interpretive principles are based on a combination of poststructuralist and interpretive ideas (Alvesson & Sköldbberg 2000; Denzin & Lincoln 2000; Rosenau 1992). The approach is rather different from methodologies emphasizing the codification of data and dividing up a large material in small chunks, e.g. conventional grounded theory. We favor the in-depth reading of texts – e.g. interview accounts – looking for deeper meanings and overall positions expressed as well as fragmentations of meanings and the presence of discourses being in operation (e.g. Alvesson 2002). This means that interview accounts are considered in terms of different kinds of logics for understanding them, e.g. an account is not necessarily expressing 'facts' or 'personal meanings', but may also be seen as outcomes of dominant discourse, political actions, impression management, script-following, etc. (Alvesson 2003).

The project

The consultancy project was a medium sized two-year rationalization assignment aimed at increasing efficiency in support services in a large and global high tech corporation, High Tech (HT). The consultant company, Big Consulting (BC), is also a large and global corporation known for its skill in IT- and management consulting. HT initiated the project as

a result of a larger acquisition of another intra-industry high-tech. Following the acquisition, management at HT signalled the ambition to rationalize a number of tasks and activities, as the purpose of the consultancy project is formulated internally: ‘to identify the synergies and saving that can be reached within service and support in this country by using concepts like shared services and identify other process and/or organizational changes’ (Internal site support documents). The ambition here is to create increased efficiency and better uses of resources by standardizing internal support services between various company sites in one region (usually a country, the original ambition of trying to leverage these services on a global scale was replaced with a more moderate version of country/regional standardization). The scope of support services that were targeted for standardization was some finance and office services, (travelling, payrolls etc), property, archive and telecom issues. According to internal documents the intentions seems threefold, one is to create a ‘high quality and professional service’ at a competitive cost within HT. This making it possible for site management to focus on ‘core business’ and also giving service and support personnel a ‘challenging and stimulating place to work’. Although the ambitions seem clear in internal documents they were hardly perceived as such by some of the site managers targeted by them, as one explained:

‘We were called to a meeting with the global manager and some people from the site support services who just told us that HT were now to cooperate with a consultancy company in order to standardize our support systems with other sites in the region and I don’t think anyone of us really understood anything about it, including the global manager. The people from support service tried to explain it but I’m not sure they understood it themselves’ (Goodwin)

The site managers in general seemed to have had trouble in realising the value of this project and the project leader in HT, Burrows, also explained that one of the major difficulties they had in achieving the intentions was the site managers:

‘the project encountered a lot of resistance, not least from the Madames, Goodwin and Pomfret, it was a threat against their power positions. So we had quite a lot of conflicts and controversies’. (Burrows)

A resistance and scepticism that he further says was grounded in ‘a local identity, to have a site identity and to show off locally’ (Burrows).

The project was partly seen by the site managers and others at the sites as a standardization and centralization process to which they were sceptical, as it was seen as reducing their independency and local influence. The consultancy project here studied was thus performed in a partly less favourable organizational context, although this was not very much addressed by the project people – consultants and client project management – in explaining less successful elements of the project, e.g. that rather little of the intentions was realized/implemented.

The consultancy project: accounts from the people involved

We will now give much space to the voices of those most closely involved in the project. We start by two consultants and then move over to three project managers from the client company. After this fairly long section, we summarize and compare first the various statements about the outcomes of the project and second the ascriptions of blame and praise for whatever that has been accomplished.

It seems generally difficult to clearly demonstrate the more precise outcomes of the project. Both among consultants in BC and among managers in the client organization, HT, there is a significant variety in their accounts about what was accomplished. This is partly a result of the use of a multitude of criteria and movements between them in the production of accounts.

The consultants

When asked about project outcome the leading consultant, **Farrington**, replies:

I think that we delivered an organization structure that I think can work for a while and lay the ground for future work effectively within service business, in the long run there has been cost cuts amounting to almost a hundred million a year. Sometimes I think that the exact connection from what have been done in terms of cost cuts without us doing this or not, that can be hard to tell for sure. The main part of the costs wouldn't have occurred if we hadn't pushed this. I think we have a very positive image today. There are some concrete decisions, we installed a management control system, making this intra-site coordination in a country possible, leading to exchange of experiences, and learning from each other and realizing that we don't need to do similar things at all sites. So that's what I think, I guess, at the same time as I personally think that we ought to have done more, moved further with more revolutionizing solutions.

On the last issue of not getting far enough and participating in changes radical enough he explains that the client was too conservative, comfortable, spoiled and cautious, too soft and unwilling to do what most other companies have to do in order to be competitive:

the client was much too cautious, nothing happened, nobody from management pushed on. It's possible the reason was their history, I mean High Tech *was* a small, spoiled organization, a little fat with its 'Star Product' (HT blockbuster), everybody who's working there is more or less a millionaire. The office where I worked is really fancy, nice buildings. They were avoiding real pressure and tough decisions and preferred to just walk around and be satisfied with things in general. So I guess it has been unclear what managers wanted to achieve, it has been volatile and people have switched positions, it's been a bit unclear.

Later in the interview he says that he personally thinks that they produced good work:

Personally it feels like the project been good, we have really established ourselves as advisers, especially for Blake and Mueller (top executives in HT) but also for other managers, we have established ourselves.

In these statements the senior consultant moves between several account positions on the outcomes and success of the project. He starts cautiously by referring to a new organizational structure that will last and make service effective. He turns to cost savings of tens of millions annually. This is a bit uncertain though and it seems difficult to know how much resulted from the project, although he is certain that the majority had not been achieved without the consultants. He moves to control systems and coordination and ends up in exchange of experiences and ideas. He emphasises the absence of radical changes by referring to the clients' history, organization and leadership although the project felt good on personal level since they established themselves in the organization.

The account is a combination of cautious markers and bold statements, indicating some uncertainty about the outcomes as well as the role of the consultants. Having emphasized some specific results, he adds that 'So that's what I think, I guess, at the same time as I personally think...' He is most convinced about 'really' establishing the consultants as advisers and leaves the impression that there is no doubt about the outcome in this respect.

Another consultant in the project, **Hudson**, is less positive about what has been accomplished. Considering the project from the clients' perspective, he says:

I mean, we didn't reach our goal and got things done that we were supposed to, so I'd say it was a very expensive documentation of the organizational processes, if I were a customer I would think so. The work done was good, what was produced was good. But since it was stopped the project was too costly in relation to the value it added.

He further says that:

The feeling in the project among us consultants was that 'this is not a very brilliant result'. We thought we had done a good job, but the result in relation to the goals was a disappointment.

He also says that the client was favourable to the project although unable to implement the ideas:

There was a big discrepancy, the customer thought this (the project) was great, they had gained very much from it. They saw that we had reached very far within some time. Quality is different, we didn't reach what we wanted, but had the customer sided with us, then we could have reached much higher, that's how we felt. We thought what we had produced was good. It's kind of a different quality aspect.

The client is here suddenly portrayed as irrational when closing a project with a lot of unrealised potential. Hudson, like his colleague, emphasizes the lack of client support:

The problem was quite big, and we suffered from it all the way actually, or I suffered from, and that was that you didn't receive any team lead from the client. And it's always hard to be the one who is pushing

Hudson is not uncertain about the outcomes – a lot of the intended changes were dropped and there was a discrepancy between huge costs and little output. The unsatisfactory result is primarily ascribed the clients inability to assess the potential of the project and support appropriate change leadership. Hudson shares the negative assessment of the client produced by Farrington, but the emphasis is different. Farrington points at the general lack of change willingness of the client organization, while Hudson thinks that it is 'team lead' that is the problem.

A third consultant, **Wilson**, also emphasizes the difficulties of the client people to deliver their part of the change work, but is more understanding. She points at the huge changes that took place at the time, and the difficulties for HT to mobilize enough people and time to do everything that was intended.

In sum then the talk of consultants seem to display variety and contradictions in terms of how to evaluate the project and the work of consultants and clients respectively. The weak imprint is primarily ascribed to the client organization while the consultants are constructed as having good ideas, being driving and knowledgeable. Next we turn to talk of clients.

The clients

Managers in the client organization are also confusingly contradictory when it comes to talking about the outcomes. One manager, **Hodges**, intensively involved, says about whether the project was profitable or not:

If we look at the deliveries and compare to our revenues, then it hasn't been profitable. I heard that BC had a group meeting, for only BC consultants, developing their tactics. I happened to be in the room next door and

there were things that I wasn't supposed to hear. I then asked them 'OK, BC, now you got to take a look at the consequences of this, where have we got the costs and where have we got the revenues for doing this'. And it turned out after a day's analysis, that to consolidate operations in this system it would cost us 15 million, just like that. Plus that we didn't have all the facts, there are a few system within operations where, I checked it up myself with people who know these systems, it takes quite extensive changes, and it would perhaps be a matter of at least just as much again. And if we make a change that costs us 30 million there, then it's not profitable

The interviewee also elaborates on the conceptual obsession of the consultants:

I think that BC often thinks in terms of concepts, about the concept, that's a good concept for them. But doing this analysis in order to document what consequences this is going to have if we implement the changes, *that* I think, is an assignment for them. As a program manager for the project today I am dissatisfied with what BC has delivered. It's a problem, I think. And then in this specific case, I think that BC doesn't take responsibility for it. They haven't seen their role, I think they've been sitting around a bit too much thinking those conceptual thoughts about how it could work but they haven't gone out and acted actively in the business.

He further thinks that the consultants disguise their inability of understanding company specifics by the use of symbolic performances:

When I try to inform them about things I try to put it as substantial as possible, to find the core issues. Then BC present enormous amounts of information, it's like heaps of pictures, lots of information. It's hard to actually analyze what is being said. I mean they're professionals when it comes to making powerpoint presentations, no one can object to that. I'd say that they have probably presented more overheads in order to push our system aside than the total amount of our systems documentation. They have produced enormous amounts of paper.

This inclination to produce persuasive documents and presentations with uncertain reference to and value for substantial issues is seen as indicating a general lack of trustworthiness.

BC is known to produce little of substance. We don't have it here perhaps, but I have a colleague who has worked at Huge Tech and I mean BC, it has occurred that they've said 'okay, you've been here and you've done this job but unfortunately, it's this many pictures but it's little deliveries'. And I'd say that it's my spontaneous view if I'd say how things are now, I don't know how much we paid them last year, but it's these many pictures and very little deliveries

Hodges thinks that one related problem is concepts that are used for marketing purposes.

I think BC have been very firmly attached to concepts and they have been focused on, I would almost say, creating possibilities to charge even more and they do that by [saying] 'OK, we can see that we don't have much revenues from their accounting unit, that's not where the money is, instead we focus on their purchase systems'. They then start to work outside the initial system, with other people in the organization in order to sort of market themselves over there, because they realize that here is more money to make. Once this fall I said in a meeting, that I felt like a sheepdog. Big Consulting people were the sheep, out and catch them. Their task is not to go out and find new possibilities here but their task is what the contract is saying. Farrington and I had lively discussions about this.

Hodges claims that the consultants interest in sales made them loose in focus for the tasks they were hired to do. He had to take charge:

I don't know what we paid them last year, but it's all these overheads and very few deliveries. Concerning the deliveries, let's say it started when I entered the first of October. And we have delivered; we have delivered a lot since then. We have an accounting organization, we will deliver an organization on operations, we will merge some support systems.

He also explains a reason for the consultants' inability to tie to company specifics:

They have relatively little experience. They seldom have experience from a business and that makes me a little doubtful about working with consultants from BC. I think they are not senior enough. I mean to be able to discuss in a concrete way that we could do this in order to get the improvements that we want to accomplish.

Although the picture varies as Hodges explains that one young consultant did a very good job:

A woman called Harriet Wilson has done a really good job. And we can consider continuing our work with Harriet. But I'd say that I would not engage Farrington, Hudson again, I don't have much confidence in them. A person like Harriet, who I could imagine employing, she focuses more on the result, and her approach is more modest, she listens and she grasps things. It's possible to have a dialogue with her. This also makes one feel 'OK, here we're having a conversation.

Another client manager, **Rogers**, evaluates the project seemingly favourably:

I mean the initial study cost less than four million and every person we have used from Big Consulting costs 15 000 a day. That makes it not so many people. Including the project we spent about 10 million. It's easy to divide by 15 and you'll get the number of working days, it's 666, so it's less than two years for a fully employed, and so by working in this way you can be very effectively.

However, he also says that many consultants are too young and lacking experience:

But if we look at these companies, these consulting companies, they've got very young people, they're not always that experienced, and I'm not ready to pay 15000 a day for teaching a Big Consulting employee.

When asked to specify the accomplishments of the consultants he claims that:

When it comes to running this project, it takes a leadership that is very clear, a leadership that is fair and that is ready to take a few punches, because there are punches, either right in the face or behind your back. If you don't have that power and if you're not tough you'll not be able to run this. If you can't deal with consultants I say like this: consultants are like rabbits, if you don't have the situation under control they'll reproduce uncontrollably, it's in their interest to make as much money as possible.

He suggests that the most important aspect when it comes to accomplishments in projects like this is always a matter of governing the consultants:

A mistake many companies make in working with consultants is that their leadership, control and drive are not strong and experienced enough. The theoretical background that the consultants have must be related to the actual context, the practical everyday life. If there's a gap, there is a risk that the job is not the best done. The exchange and dialogue is continuous and it has to be completely continuous, otherwise we won't get a good product, and also, it's important that not only they keep up the pace. It is not they who run the project, but the representatives of the company and they should make use of BC.

The manager suggests that on account of their own leadership they were able to extract the best from the consultants.

I think you must engage competent resources (from the client), competent people to discuss with, who know what you're talking about, who have broad experience, who can run this discussion, that there are resources in the company who can give time enough so that one can take the theoretical experiences that the consultants have and transform them into specific circumstances. If those resources don't exist, if one doesn't prioritise this, then there's a risk that it will not turn out good because then it builds more on theory and other companies' experiences than on the specific situation of this company. The consultants can't work isolated because then it becomes a drawing board product, they have to continuously bring in knowledge and viewpoints from the organization.

This sounds as general philosophising about the management of consultancy projects from the client company, but it seems like the interviewee has his own role and contributions in the project in mind.

The project manager in the client organization, **Burrows**, explains that the reason they chose BC was that:

Facing that choice, I chose BC, no question about it. Not because of the price, but the possibility for a decent success.

The impression is that no deeper analysis preceded the choice of consultants. The generally good reputation of Big plus the fact that Burrows had met Farrington in another context appear to account for the choice of consulting firm.

When talking about the contributions of the consultants he says that:

I experience that we have benefited very much from BC, mostly thanks to their competence and their enormous computer media skills. When working with an old guy like me, who has lived four generations too early in terms of computers, then there's no chance to make things work if you don't have these employees from Big Consulting, who are excellent with computers.

He also explains that they were 'young', 'analytical' and good at documenting what had been done:

The strengths of this new generation is that they are so incredibly good with computers, and you can very quickly jot down what's been said. Not like us, if Rogers and I had done that it would have taken twice as long to write it down and summarize. Farrington did it in no time. He printed it out in no time; I mean it was finished half an hour after we had discussed it.

Presumably, this demonstrated skill in typewriting of discussion protocol is viewed as indicative of a broader set of competences. However, when asked about what has been achieved organizationally he says that:

Some things have been accomplished, but not at all that we expected. One has to remember one thing – why this project started. It was a part of HT's promise to shareholders that we will save money through rationalizations of which some would be saved in this 'shared service'. We calculated and put forward what we thought it would amount to. But then it has diluted and soon I don't know what would become of all the billions that we would save. But what have come out of this are the presentations that Farrington and Blake had for management in London. After what we've done, everybody has thought that this was an amazingly good and well-accomplished project. But that everything can't be accomplished has to do with political reasons of course.

He talks about his own role in project by stating that:

We fit very well together; we complemented each other. Farrington has his competence, his points, sees it from a slightly different angle. I am perhaps a bit more conservative, have my experiences, and that balance is very good I think. It's the same thing when you put up management teams, it doesn't help that you have the best theorist in the world so to speak, if there is no interplay, a team spirit. Sure, one came in for one's share of hardship during this time when we were working with it. But I'm so hardened today that it doesn't matter that we were moving a little too fast forward, but that's the way it is with project management.

When asked to elaborate further on his role he states that:

It's (a) project that is defined from a certain goal and to lead is simply a matter of being a team leader. Coach. You choose the persons who will be included in the A-team. (Q: What about the daily leadership then?) Planning, follow-ups. Stimulation. Planning and follow-ups above all, comparing. I think that the most important characteristics is the ability to choose the people you work with. And I have been practically free to

do that. The problem has just been to get the ones that I want on the ship, because of resources. Not because they didn't want to, but a few couldn't cope with it. To take the responsibility, both as main project leader and the project leader, are demanding, the demands are quite high both in terms of time, goals and scope. And since I've got the experience and age within High Tech, I can sense which people would fit in different situations. And with a few exceptions, I think I have managed well.

Accomplishments – ambiguity and identity

Comparing the accounts produced give a very complex and varied picture of project accomplishments and successes. Rather than trying to 'home in' the 'real' results, we take variation in accounts seriously, although we will also point at similarities between accounts.

The empirical material displays fragmentation of work accomplishments and difficulties to consistently determine achievements. Although the project could be seen as a fairly straightforward one of consolidating support resources, informants' claims about the accomplishments seemingly point in every possible direction. The senior consultant, Farrington, talks of millions in savings (success). His junior colleague, Hudson, found the consultancy work well done and the economic potential promising, but the project was stopped and the client had to pay for large consultancy costs that did not lead to very much (no success). The other junior consultant, Wilson, expressed something similar. Among the client representatives, Hodges speaks of weak and nonexistent deliveries but his own intervention saved things (some success), Rogers talks of savings although he does not specify them in detail (probably some success) and Burrows finally talks about the lack of any results with substantial organizational impact (no real success) but refers to a well received formal presentation (as success). The picture that emerges is highly ambiguous.

Especially interesting is that the variety, inconsistency and contradictions between the accounts of people in some cases are significant also within accounts produced by one person. Farrington begins with strong notions of large savings that is followed by less and less strong claims. It seems as the more he talks about accomplishments the less obvious they become and he ends blaming the client for the weak imprint, although he personally feels good about the impression produced. He saves the idea of consultants being important although sometimes the client does not permit them to realize their true potential. The latter rather contradictory to what he initially claims. Burrows characterizes the project as successful although very little has been organizationally accomplished. As the consultants he is eager to maintain that consultants were competent although unclear about what more than exhibit knowledge of computers.

Farrington and Burrows both state that the project was viewed as successful, particular by client senior management, despite a lack of full realization and delivery – due to factors outside their hands, it is implied. Farrington and to some extent the two client managers Hodges and Rogers, seem to say that significant substantial effects was accomplished. This is contradicted by Hudson and, although more cautiously formulated, Burrows, who indicated limited such accomplishments. The two consultants claim that they did a good job and that the client confirmed this. Burrows support this view, but not the other two client managers, whose opinion about Big is skeptical and in some ways directly negative. Both stress the lack of experience and the consultants marketing interests as problems and emphasize their own role in getting the consultants on track. On key issues, the people most closely involved in the project express highly diverse beliefs and opinions and what is interesting is that it is not

just one person expressing a deviant voice, making it difficult to identify a position or a claim to a fact that has more support than any other on these key issues.

Distribution of praise and blame – identity work (and constructions of ‘the other’)

The ambiguous situation of the consultancy project offers a broad space for the distribution of credit/praise and blame since there’s no way of knowing what happened anyway. We turn to this aspect next.

The consultants

In moving in various directions and situating themselves in different positions the consultants seem to search for a way to evaluate the project that seem favourable for themselves and their organization. They seem to agree that the client did not support them well enough and that the client is primarily to blame for the unsatisfactory outcome. The good work and success accomplished are ascribed to them and responsibility for failure is ascribed to the client. Praise us and blame the client, seems to be the slogan.

The consultants portray the client as generally conservative, cautious, spoiled, soft and irrational. Hudson blames the client for the non-realization of the project potential and for not following up expensive and high-quality analysis and proposals with implementation. The client lacked the right drive, endurance and power to lead. The positive accomplishments (although vague) wouldn’t have been achieved without the consultants, Farrington says. The consultants expressed drive, knowledge and ability to participate in radical changes. They are thus constructed as knowledgeable change agents in a conservative and indulged context were they were hindered of realising this professionalism. The consultants construct the client in terms of being passive, non-knowledgeable and unreliable in contrast to the consultants being active, result-oriented and long-term oriented, thus professional and the ‘right stuff’.

The client people

The praise and blame stories of the client personnel is quite different, although not as coherent as the consultants’ versions.

In spite of strong criticism against the BC people, Hodges does not portray the project as a pure failure. Instead he explains how he intervened and straightened it up by initiating the appropriate changes. He initiated resolute conversations with the consultant in charge displaying firmness in a disordered, unproductive and potentially chaotic situation. From the moment he stepped in the project substantial deliveries has been made, showing his initiative, knowledge of the situation and ability to lead the consultants. In spite of a varied and contradictory picture of accomplishments of the consultants Hodges blames and condemns the consultants for not having delivered substantially for a long time and for trying to disguise this with expressive and symbolic performances. Hodges constructs the consultants as superfluous, not particularly knowledgeable of the situation and eager to avoid revealing these flaws by symbolically and meetings in stealth, out of reach for the client.

Rogers’ account is similar. He ascribes project success on account of the contributions of his own organization in leading and controlling the consultants, described as unreliable and interested in selling as many services as possible. He is the one who took the lead, who faced

difficult situations and who stood straight when the situations demanded it. He thus displays character, order and integrity while the other exhibits fragmentation and a morally questionable sales interest. Rogers' self-portrait as a potent manager of the right stuff in handling the conceptual rabbits from BC thus sustains a favourable self-identity. Similar to Hodges, the success depended on his own abilities and actions, according to his version.

Burrows is positive to the consultants. He ascribes the lack of implementation vaguely to general organizational conditions and indicates that the entire project was partly about satisfying market analysts – credible intentions and promises may here count more than actual delivery, it is indicated. However, when taking credit for taking charge and leading the project Burrows implies that consultants left on their own do not lead to success, they key being his own 'project leading'. Although Burrows seemingly felt comfortable with the consultants relieving his anxiety of IT issues he is also eager not to give them too much credit. He states clearly that he and his colleagues held control of the project throughout the entire time, never letting the consultants taking charge of it. He talks of how he had goals, planned and staffed the project quite successfully, thus portraying himself as the one in charge and in control.

He comes back to his own role in those rather firm concepts of management, perhaps as way of sustaining his own significance and identity in a vague and indeterminable project with weak organizational imprint. The implicit construction of self-identity is done by referring to the consultants' abilities and complementarities in 'safe' or 'light' areas such as youthfulness, 'foot work' and computer skills. When it comes to the outcome of the project he was in charge. As with all involved in the project, the construction of the others facilitates his identity work.

The three client managers thus disagree upon the impact of consultants. Burrows see the youth of the consultants as an advantage – a source of complementarity – while the other two views this as a source of lack of competence and high learning costs. They all seem to produce similar accounts about the project at the end being mainly successful. While the contributions of the consultants are characterized in a variety of ways, they all ascribe success primarily to client management. Interestingly, they all credit themselves and say very little of the role of the other client managers. They all seem to agree that consultants must be managed rather tightly; otherwise there is no way of reaching success. While Hudson and to some extent Farrington say that the client managers more or less failed in producing lead management the client people give themselves credit for doing precisely that.

It is interesting to note that the three client managers allocate very little blame to sectors within their own organization – even though Burrows points at resistance and local politics as a negative element and the undertext of Hodges' and Rogers' stories is that other client managers were unsuccessful in controlling the consultants. The blame of the two latter is explicitly heavily focusing BC. It is also interesting to note that all three client managers stress their own masculinity – being in control, though, experienced, capable, can stand conflicts and even violent attacks.

Comparison

In sum then, there seems to be sufficient ambiguity about what has been done and the outcomes of the project to facilitate a wide variety of distributions of credit and blame. All the interviewees, except in one respect Burrows, agree that each of them are to be credited

for whatever positive impact/efforts was accomplished and that either the consultants, if you are a manager, or the clients, if you are a consultant, are to be blamed for problems and insufficiencies. The consultants refer to themselves as a group – perhaps in line with the firm’s tendency to emphasize the project team as the key unit – while the client managers emphasize themselves as individuals taking on the burden for getting things straight. Burrows differs from the other four in that he does not blame any of those most closely involved, but still indicates that the project succeeded on account of his own contributions as a project leader. He succeeded in choosing the right people, an A-team, people that could handle tough demands and situations – although the picture is somewhat confusing as those (internal persons) he tried to recruit in many cases could not or did not want to be engaged in the project.

Discussions

The outcome of the consultancy project in terms of reduced net costs or improved organizational functioning seems impossible to determine, based on the interview statements. It may have been possible to go further than we have done in investigating what ‘actually’ happened and the ‘real’ results produced, but this has not been our major interest and it would anyhow be futile to ‘objectively’ determine the competence, deliveries, concept-focus, inertia, lack of team lead, etc of those involved and how the consultants directly and indirectly influenced what took place in the client company during the time period. All such efforts to track what really happened and the outcomes are dependent on what informants say and ours do not seem to be entirely reliable in this respect. (They may be less atypical in this respect than what conventional research approaches assume. The assumption that interviewees simply can report ‘facts’ or even ‘authentic experiences’ may be difficult to support, see Potter & Wetherell 1987; Silverman 1993; Alvesson 2003.)

Our study indicates that consultancy work is, at least sometimes, very difficult to assess. It scores high on ambiguity both in terms of what has actually been done and what are the results (Alvesson 1993, 2004). It raises scepticism against views that consultants’ work is about value-creation and that the expansion of consultancy work is a sign of its contributions to organizational effectiveness. Given the frequency with which empirical research delivers patterns or clear results, we tend to agree with Martin & Meyerson (1988) who stress that ambiguity is denied in organizations. Realizing that our results may be somewhat atypical, it still raises the question of ambiguity being neglected or treated in a trivial way.

People involved tend to use a variety of criteria for success. The senior participants – the senior consultant and the client manager – emphasize persuasive presentations and a favourable impression with client top management as the most crucial criteria for success. This seems to be a safe indication on ‘real’ success – the proof of the value of something is determined by the assessments of the superior referees – but one can of course see this in purely political terms. If top management is happy, then one’s own career and future sales possibilities appear to be in order (Jackall 1988). What has been accomplished ‘substantially’ may matter less. Politics can also account for the difference between the client project manager and his colleagues in the assessments of the consultants. As the former has chosen the consultancy firm – and to some extent also the senior consultant – he has psychological and political reasons for presenting the consultants as competent and as good collaborators.

Another consultant from Big – unrelated to the project studied – that we interviewed in another context pointed at there is generally a political alliance between the senior consultant and the person responsible from the client. They have a shared interest in supporting each other and present the project as successful. The client can't therefore blame the consultant. This probably accounts for the similarities in the accounts of Farrington and Burrows in terms of the outcome of the project.

The client is not a monolith. In most consultancy and – more broadly – professional service literature the client is treated as something unitary. Professionals are client-oriented, it is often said (e.g. Anderson-Gough et al 2000). This may be less problematic in health care and law if the client is an individual, but in professional business service, there may be a lot of variety of interests and views in the client organization. In the case presented here, the consultants seem to make the client project manager satisfied, and possibly client top management, but hardly the other involved client managers. They are possibly more positive about 'substantial' project outcomes, but sceptical to the consultants' contributions and competence.

One may speculate about the different 'interpretive' logics used by various client groups. Also the sceptics acknowledge the consultants' skills in making presentations, although they see no value in this, and thinks that all the ambitious power point presentations may be deceptive and draw attention and energy away from practical issues. Top management, on the other hand, may have less knowledge about and interest in practical matters, but may be more impressed by good presentations and assume that the representations that they encounter indicates 'substantive' matters. (See also Jackall 1988, who claims that this logic dominates organizations, in which symbolic acts take precedence over substantive matters, and Clark 1995, emphasizing consultancy work as performance and impression management.)

The power relations as they come out of the accounts gives a different impression than the one conveyed in most literature emphasizing the asymmetry of the professional-client relationship favouring the former, being an expert giving advice to the client being in an uncertain and dependable position (Löwendahl 1997; Sturdy 1997). The client managers emphasize their significance and controlling influence. They are the dominant part in the collaboration in firmly managing the consultants, otherwise being caught in their concepts, power-point presentations and looking for further sales, rather than delivering services. The consultants are less impressed by the client people, but say that they can't do much without client engagement and drive and complain about lack of stamina and team lead. The significance of client management in consultancy project needs to be taken more seriously (Fincham 1999b).

A salient element in the accounts is the strong gender undertone of the client managers' accounts. Work life frequently is gendered – irrespective of the biology of people involved – and sometimes this dimension becomes visible (Alvesson & Billing 1997; Collinson & Hearn 1994; Kerfoot & Knights 1998). The client managers picture themselves as highly masculine, more often of a worker class rather than managerial fashion. It is not so much a matter of being rational, analytic and distanced – typical forms of managerial masculinity – but being tough, down-to-earth and acting like a sheep-dog or a rabbit-hunter. This is most pronounced in the cases of Hodges and Rogers. Burrows expresses a more patriarchal attitude. Consultants are credited for typing out protocols quickly and the local managers putting up resistance are referred to as the 'Madames'. But all reassure the interviewer that they can take

a beating and two of them emphasize that they can confront unreliable and confused consultants with serious talk and ensure that they deliver. Alvesson (1998) suggests that in some advertising work, there is this gender undertext, in which the service providers are put in a 'feminine' position, adaptable, service-minded and 'client-oriented', compared to the more masculine client personnel. For client personnel consultants – coming in as experts and being very well-paid – it may trigger feelings of uncertainty and status problems making them want to re-assure themselves (and others) about their masculinity. Against the young, inexperienced consultants doing superficial things like sales and power point presentations, the client people do know the business and are interested in substance, in delivering real results, etc. A similar, but far less strong, gender undertone is comes through in the rational, professional and result-oriented consultants' constructions of the client people portrayed in 'non-masculine' terms.

One of the most pronounced themes in the accounts concerns the distributions of blame and praise. There is very little self-critique involved. All – except the client project manager – ascribe a lot of blame on the other. All – including the client project manager – indicate that they have done a very good job, in spite of the difficulties created by the other part. This is probably to some extent a general feature of human life, but here one goes exceptionally far. Their portrayal of the client organization as spoiled, soft, irrational and incapable of running a business in the way that is commonly done in business life, in the accounts of the consultants. Similarly, the consultants are portrayed as confused, superficial, inexperienced and greedy, more interested in getting additional sales than delivering, better at producing smokescreens through mysterious concepts and enormous amounts of overheads than really understanding and improving the client's business.

Consultancy projects do seem to offer an excellent opportunity for blaming the other, since oneself and those one is talking to are protected from hearing the version(s) of the other part after the determination of the project. It is possible that all this negative talk fulfils a therapeutic function – consultancy, like other big change projects, are complex and tension-ridden and people may get frustrated and hurt (Alvesson 2004). The negative stories produced may thus partly be about letting off steam. But there are of course also a strong political dimension attached to blaming the other. Being successful in ascribing failure and incompetence to others, and associate oneself with clever moves and good outcomes is a cornerstone in managing one's career.

It is, of course, tricky to assess to what extent the accounts reflect people's true perceptions. They may also be an affect of political astuteness (Alvesson 2003). Politically skilled actors may routinely tell stories that they believe favour themselves. We can chose to emphasize that the accounts are of interest in terms of the stories communicated rather than as indicators of the beliefs and meanings that people 'really' have. In research we seldom know if we listen to or observe reliable signs of what informants 'really' believe, feel or think. The 'true story' may more frequently be revealed by those we want it from on the deathbed, on the shrink's coach or when they are very drunk in the sauna. (Un)fortunately, we are seldom at these sites with our tape-recorders.

One could choose to interpret the accounts as being less about what the interviewees really believe or as political motivated acts promoting their interests, and see the accounts as examples of identity work instead. In identity work people work through a troubled sense of self and try to create a more appealing view of who they are, favourable for self-esteem and offering a clearer position of being (Alvesson & Willmott 2002). The characterization of the

Other draws heavily upon standards (scripts) for describing clients respectively consultants – both fit dominant stereotypes nicely. The interviewees themselves then indirectly come out as the opposite. Against the fat, slow, spoiled and conservative client, the consultant is competitive, trimmed, efficient, bold and result-oriented. Against the ignorant, inexperienced, superficial, confused and greedy consultant, the client manager is anchored in business, committed, masculine, experienced, responsible and result-oriented. Consultancy projects thus seem a) to produce a need for and b) symbolic resources for identity work (cf Alvesson 1994, 1998).

Consultants are, according to the client people, limited by their model-world and concepts that make sense and order as well as a base for selling for consultants but which is not particularly valuable for understanding the organizational reality at hand and solving the client's problem. That specific concepts and methods are sometimes perceived as tricky by client people is also indicated by Henriksson (1999) who refers to client people – engineers in large building project – who think that the models of the consultants are important for them in order to demonstrate 'knowledge', but of mainly negative value for their work with the issues in the project. It seems important to complement studies of consultants' own view of knowledge and methods (e.g. Werr & Stjernberg 2003) with the point of view of clients.

It is interesting to note the existence of privately or at least narrowly held beliefs among actors involved. There are signs on limited negotiations of meanings. The constructions of the project and the abilities and actions of the various actors sometimes seem more idiosyncratic than socially shared. A popular formula in social science is that 'reality is a social construction', but our case suggests the idiosyncrasies of many constructions. We could perhaps talk about 'realities as a-social constructions' instead. The two consultants produce very different statements about the overall success of the project. The senior consultant was helpful in giving us access and was well aware that we interviewed other consultants as well as client personnel. He refers to the success of project and how the consultants had established themselves in the client organization. Apparently he assumed that all or most people involved had a favourable impression of the project and of the consultants. Otherwise he would – as most consultants – not have let us in or minimally commented upon the versions that the clients could have been expected to produce.

Conclusions

In the conclusion, we will briefly discuss some methodological lessons – or perhaps rather support for some methodological ideas that partly have been expressed in some recent literature – from this study and then list our major empirically supported conclusions.

For those with a strong belief in numbers this study may appear to rely on shaky ground. A counterposition to such critique could be that our study raise strong doubts on the value of quantitative studies in areas such as the present one, where assessments and accounts can't be taken at face value as indicative of 'facts' or stable meanings. As the 'knowing subjects', whose cognitive and moral capacity is a key element of good data, do seem to have great difficulties in producing constructions of the world that is confirmed by others involved, just multiplying the numbers would not solve this problem. A large quantity of questionnaire responses would possibly conceal the ambiguities so central in the positions taken – or at least reported – by the people involved. A large number of interview accounts – e.g. from more than one case – would be beneficial in many ways, but as the detailed reading of the

accounts and careful attention paid to reasoning, incoherencies and positioning is vital, then a larger material may be tricky to handle in one study, at least in one article. Large qualitative materials are typically mainly used for extracting 'how it is' or how a person mainly perceives/thinks/feels about an issue. We think it would be a mistake to ask people to report and look for a simple or dominant perception on e.g. project success or faith in consultants' competence. We feel that an ambition to use our material in such a way would distract from some crucial elements in how people involved in consultancy projects relate to these and that, minimally, there are good reasons to look carefully at specific cases and to give space to people's reasoning in the reporting of results.

A possible methodological contribution is thus about the need to a) not rely on individuals involved in complex, ambiguous and politically charged situations to telling 'truths' confirmed by others, b) look at the incoherencies and fragility of accounts, c) consider the variety of constitutive elements behind and in interview accounts – from politics and identity work to the (re)production of available scripts about others (Alvesson 2003), and d) not necessarily expect that more empirical material necessarily will bring us closer to 'a truth' or a single, well-supported 'story'. The point of added 'data' may lead to richer, more varied accounts, the 'homing out' rather than, as triangulists would have it, 'homing in' (Potter & Wetherell 1987). Understanding consultancy projects may call for a 'homing out' research approach – allowing and taken incoherencies seriously.

In terms of empirically supported results about consultancy projects we suggest no less than ten conclusions, mainly summarizing our discussion above.

1. Consultancy projects are often ambiguous and difficult to assess in the form of outcomes. They then offer opportunities for those involved to explain and evaluate the accomplishments in a variety of ways. These explanations are important part of the consultancy projects – which live on in the form of representations after the formal completion of the projects.

2. The people involved move between various different criteria making any consistent notion of project evaluation very difficult, allowing versions of successes and failures favouring their own position. As 'substantive' outcomes are difficult to determine it seems as if success (or failure) is frequently not necessarily related to the successful (or failed) realization of the presumed intentions behind the project, but may be more tied to the impressions made on people less knowledgeable about the project. Project presentations may matter as much as material project outcomes, at least for some actors. To the extent that the core of consultancy is advise-giving – rather than implementation – the presentation and documents produced could be seen as important, but there is an interesting diversity of opinions whether this element is central or not. Some researchers say that performances in the form of presentations is a crucial part of consultancy work (e.g. Clark & Salaman 1996), but for some client managers this is just a bad substitute for the 'real work' they think was the core of the project.

3. Around the negotiation and communication of signs on success there is a subtle politics, not only played out in between consultants and client people – although this is sometimes significant – but there is also an important alliance between the consultants and the client manager responsible for choosing them. Apart from the interest in blaming the other part for problems, both have a mutual interest in protecting the other.

4. For the mentioned reasons the 'objective' contributions of consultants may not be an important element in their success – the market does not necessarily reward high competence and good performances. Ambiguities, various representations of success/failure,

alliance between consultant and client manager all matter. It can be noted that there seems to be very limited feedback and learning potential from the project. According to Ernst & Kieser (2003) systematic evaluations of the impact of consultants' work are almost nonexistent.

5. It is important to pay attention to client diversity. Most literature on management consultancy treat the client as a single person, treating 'client-orientation' as a fairly unproblematic idea (e.g. Anderson-Gough et al 2000). But there is presumably often a plurality of interests and perceptions within the client organization, creating difficulties in managing client relationships. Some authors emphasize the role of consultants' 'knowledge and skill in identifying and manipulating the mutually acceptable symbols of knowledge in the course of convincing performances' (Clark & Salaman 1998: 147). The problem is that client people may respond very differently on such manipulations, contingent upon position and experiences. Apart from client pluralism, also variation within the consultant group is worth considering. For the senior consultant, establishing contact and having produced a favourable impression with client top management and creating a ground for further sales is vital, while the junior consultant is focused on 'real accomplishments' and on doing a good job. All this motivates a change from conceptualizing consultant-client relationship in monolithic terms and taking multiple plurality seriously.

6. Consultancy projects may involve a gender undertext, possibly triggered by the asymmetries and the structure of the relationships involved. In the present study the involved client managers in particular strongly constructed themselves in masculine terms – using rather 'primitive' metaphors of a violent nature. The male consultants on their side, described the client organization in if not feminine so at least 'non- masculine' terms. The only female participant, a junior consultant, was addressed favourably, partly through emphasizing 'feminine' orientations such as being sensitive and humble, although she is also credited with being 'result-oriented'. There is, at least sometimes, a gender undertone in consultancy relationships – where people (at least men) seem eager to emphasize their own masculinity and/or the femininity of the other part. Age, expertise, service-orientation, instrumentality, hands-on-knowledge, perceived need for/absence of forcefulness are all symbolic resources in this gendering of what takes place and the characteristics of the participants. In a situation high on uncertainty, the ascription of gendered meanings may be experienced as reducing ambiguity and work as a defence mechanism (Alvesson 1998).

7. A critical element in consultancy work is marketing and getting additional sales. This is complex, expensive and demanding. Promotion and compensation of individuals in large consultancy firms are highly dependent on their sales (Pinault 2000). Most selling takes place during on-going projects, which arguably are of some benefit for the client as the consultant can identify areas which can be improved. In the case this creates tension between the consultants and the client managers. The latter see this as being at the expense of delivery of service and as indicative of the limited credibility of the consultants. If observations/suspensions of the engagement in excessive sales activities are triggering low faith or used as a rationalization of scepticism is hard to say, but may anyway be an element in a problematic relationship.

8. One of very few issues on which there seems to be consensus is that client management is crucial for at least the kind of consultancy projects that the case is about. There is a lot of talk in the literature emphasizing the strong consultant and the weak client, but this may be more relevant for client firms in a tricky situations. In the studied consultancy work, the consultants are heavy dependent on the client mobilizing resources and acting in a focused way. The consultants can do rather little on their own.

9. The period after the completion of a consultancy project there seems to be plenty of space for as well as experienced need for distributing praise and blame – for blaming the

other and praising oneself. One can understand this as fulfilling an emotional as well as political function. Talking about the other in a particular way can be therapeutic as well as reinforcing one's career prospects. Most literature tends to emphasize the consensual relationships involved – even if one part is the stronger one, there is an assumption of a shared interest. Against this, our study indicates that consultancy projects are sometimes contested terrain.

10. The distribution of praise and blame can also, however, be conceptualised in terms of identity work (defining oneself and raising self esteem in the context of experiences of uncertainty and doubt). Identity work may be about sustaining notions of people being in charge, taking initiative and leading people firmly in demanding situations of change and uncertainty. The search for (inevitable) success in an ambiguous context thus seemingly inspires people to exploit a known script of making themselves morally and intellectually up to high standards as well as highly action-oriented while the others lack these virtues. Through drawing upon negative, stereotypical views of the Other, oneself appears in the opposite light. Identity follows from the dis-identification with the Other. Clark & Salaman (1998) emphasize the complementarity of consultants and clients, suggesting that the former's 'roles and success lies in their supporting management work and reducing uncertainty' (p 156), mainly through management of meaning and the telling of narratives assisting the client manager to define him- or herself and the situation. Interestingly, our case indicates the opposite: there are strong tensions and the client managers define themselves in opposition to the consultant's efforts to work with specific concepts and mastering meaning management in e.g. formal presentations.

We do believe that our case motivates a broad span of conclusions that hopefully can inspire further empirical studies of consultancy practices. If we should emphasize a single set of issues, it would be the limits of rationality, the centrality of identity work and the politics of identity in consultancy projects – for the consultants as well as the client personnel. Gender themes seem to be an element here. Consultancy projects are thus also identity projects, with a strong gender undertone. They are in a sense not different from working life in general – work is frequently overloaded with identity meanings. There may be the risk of identity work – of consultants as well as client people – interfering in complicated and destructive ways with materially oriented productive work and project relations. Strong ascriptions of negative orientations, abilities and actions of the Other and favourable constructions of oneself and one's own intentions, actions and contributions counteract productive work relationships and prevent learning.

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