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## Consultants as Strategic Practitioners: An Analysis in the Sociological Field Research of Strategy-as-Practice

Renato Lopes da Costa\*

ISCTE: Lisbon, Portugal

Nelson Antonio

ISCTE: Lisbon, Portugal

Isabel Miguel

ISLA: Santarém, Portugal

**Abstract:** Although management consulting activities have obtained a considerable growth in terms of economic significance in recent years, these results have not been duly followed by a greater number of conceptual and empirical researches in this area. In order to fight the lack of studies on the actual work of management consultants, this article aims at answer to one question that remains open. Are consultants the real experts and the true practitioners of strategy as practice? The results of the empirical analysis in the form of semi-structured interviews and questionnaires given to management consultants and SME managers in Portugal shows that management consulting is founded on a knowledge-intensive base, although consultants cannot be called strategy practitioners as many authors call them. This is illustrated in the model presented in this article, which means this proposition is a new direction in strategic thinking in what the field's research strategy-as-practice concerns.

**Keywords:** Management consulting; Strategy-as-practice; Knowledge.

### 1. Introduction

In fact, although the strategic management consulting activities have achieved considerable growth in terms of economic significance in recent years, these findings have not been properly accompanied by a greater number of conceptual and empirical researches, resulting in a shortage of insight about the effective work of the consultants (Fincham and Clark, 2002a).

In Portugal, although some studies such as the ones of Ferreira and Peixoto (1992), Inácio and Weir (1993), Amorim (1999), Amorim and Kipping (1999), Silva (1997) and Freire (2008), have contributed in some way to the construction of scientific knowledge in this area, the truth is that none of them focuses on the study of practices and activities at the level of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Portugal.

Internationally, although the progress and the heterogeneity of scientific studies carried out over the past decade in the area of strategic consulting for prestigious authors such as Sturdy (1997), Sturdy and Wright (2008), Sturdy (2009), Kaiser and Kampe (2005), McGivern (1983), McLarty and Robinson (1998), Fincham (1999), (Fincham and Clark, 2002a), (Fincham *et al.*, 2008) (Karantinou and Hogg, 2001;2009), Werr and Linnarsson (2002), Werr and Styhre (2002), Jackall (1988), Clark (1995), Clark and Salaman (1996), Clark (2004), (Jarzabkowski, 2004;2005), Jarzabkowski *et al.* (2007), Jarzabkowski and Spee (2009), Jarzabkowski (2003), (Whittington, 2001;2002; Whittington *et al.*, 2004; Whittington, 2006;2007) and Lundgren and Blom (2009) are synonymous of added value, the fact is retained is that also here the strategy workers hev not received much attention in the strategic field of research. Whittington (2007) gives us an example of this, by stressing out that until 2007 there were no articles published about consulting in one of the main strategy newspapers like the "Strategy Management Journal". A deeper and more recent research also shows there are no publications within the research field of strategy-as-practice and under the link of this area to the work of strategic consultants.

On a more practical component, even though the recent move of the Strategy-as-Practice<sup>1</sup> (SAP) have implied some attention on the importance of consultants (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2007; Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009;

<sup>1</sup> Movement created in 2007 by Whittington and Jarzabkowski through [www.strategy\\_as\\_practice.org](http://www.strategy_as_practice.org) internet site in order to understand the actions, interactions and multi-stakeholder negotiations to build a set of practical situations that result later in a particular activity, bringing to the center of the study actions and interactions in the field of strategic research and the research field of social complexity and causal ambiguity of the basic view of resource analysis, which comes to explain the practice that constitutes the strategic process

Whittington, 2006), the truth is that this importance has almost no reflection in SAP literature, except for the work carried out by Whittington starting in 1996, to Jarzabkowski from 2001 and McLarty and Robinson (1998), Kaiser and Kampe (2005) and Lundgren and Blom (2009), the last with greater exposure as it was presented to the international community of scholars and practitioners of strategic as practice.

Thus, to battle the lack of studies in this emerging area it is necessary to enter this market and understand this activity, bringing the academic field a considerable amount of information that contributes concretely to the development of this research and one of the way to do it is to comprehend and outline the characteristics and factors that lead to the identification of the identity of this industry, realizing its bond with the market in terms of knowledge, rather than just identify with a set of static techniques which are going to be applied (Fincham and Clark, 2002a).

Considering the theme of this research as part of SAP, this study aimed to relate two study variables, the management consulting industry and its framework at the level of SMEs, taking into account the way it conducts the transmission of knowledge and organizational practices that are applied by the consultants in terms of these same PME's in Portuguese territory.

Therefore responding to Drucker (2000) challenge where he invites managers to create the future and develop to the most a world opportunities, this research aims to add to the development of scientific knowledge in the management consultancy sector through the following objectives;

- 1) "In a theoretical context to analyse the processes and the strategic practice at work of the management consulting, addressing the theme of SAP of the consultant as a strategy practitioner."
- 2) "The empirical level analyse if consultants can be named as true strategy practitioners and what roles they have in this context".

## 2. Strategy-as-Practice

The perspective of the strategy-as-practice established from the advances of the studies undertaken by Whittington by addressing the issues of social structure on one side, and strategic decisions in the corporate strategies of the organizations of recession and recovery environments on the other, and has been studying this field of research refocusing the research into practical actions and interactions of the strategy in order to understand the strategy in a sociological point of view, being this objective also related to social behaviours in the social context of organizations.

For many years the strategy was analysed primarily based on the actions and internal dynamics of companies trying to relate this vision in terms of organizational performance (Johnson *et al.*, 2007), focusing the action only on certain top groups, seeming that only they can act strategically, which Johnson *et al.* (2003) explain as a result of the microeconomic area, leaving aside the emotions, motivations and actions that lead and drive the strategy itself Jarzabkowski and Spee (2009).

The development of the strategy-as-practice addresses these concerns by bringing to the focus of the study the actions and interactions in the field of strategic research and to the research field the social complexity and causal ambiguity of basic view of resources' analysis (Jarzabkowski, 2005), while explaining also the practice that establishes the strategic process (Johnson *et al.*, 2003).

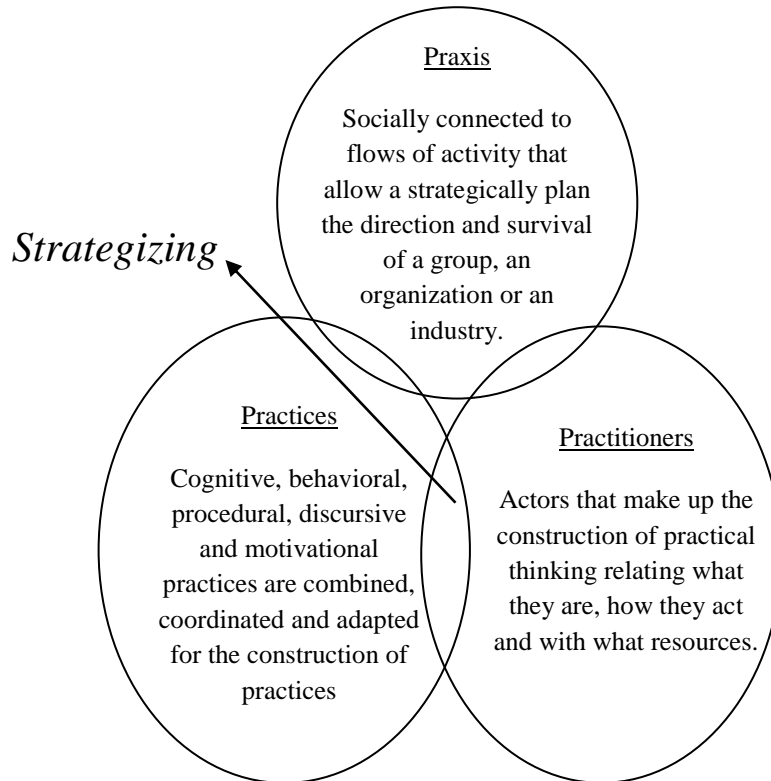
According Jarzabkowski *et al.* (2007), the term strategy-as-practice can be defined as a situation that includes actions, interactions and multi-stakeholder negotiations in construction and a set of practical situations that result later in a particular activity, and so the parameters are interpreted in the study of the practitioners (people who make the strategy work), practices (social, symbolic and material tools with which the strategy is made) and the "praxis" [the activity flow in which the strategy will be implicit (Jarzabkowski, 2005; Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2007; Whittington, 2006).

Together, the practitioners, the practices and praxis, are the elements that organise the strategy-as-practice research topic, establishing what is called "making strategy" (Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009), or strategizing (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2007), worrying about who does it, what is done, how it is done, what is used and what are the implications of this guidance in the conceptualization of the strategy (Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009), whose importance is crucial regarding the direction and possible organizational performance.

The idea of practice in strategic theory derives from the sociological construction of practice (Kaiser and Kampe, 2005). Here, the practice is basically defined as the matrix of human activity. This largely reflects the sociological thinking of Giddens (1984) trying to examine the independent activity of social structures. Following this idea, Schatzki (2001) outlines the practice as "the matrix of centrally organized human activity around common practical understandings," highlighting the development and dependence of the activity on the skills and shared understandings, aiming to the unification of mind and activity in practice.

In the same perceptive Thévenot (2001) speaks of practice as "bodily activities and shaped by habits without thinking," stressing out the nature of routine action. The focus is on unconsciousness of daily activities, routines, habits and traditions. In business terms, practice is therefore the condensation of body and mind in action during routines of the organizational process. (Swidler, 2001; Thévenot, 2001).

In order to structurally theorize the concept of strategy and practice, based on three conceptual elements of the strategy-as-practice (practitioners, practices and praxis), Whittington (2006) proposes a structure that allows isolating each of these elements, in a way that each establishes an analytical choice in the study of strategy-as-practice (Jarzabkowski, 2005) - Figure 1.

**Figure-1:** Conceptual framework of analysis of the strategy-as-practice

Source: (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2007)

The heart of the conceptual model of the strategy-as-practice is what Whittington (2006) calls "strategizing", enclosed by the architecture represented in Figure 1, being each of these elements important to investigate the field of strategy-as-practice.

Strategic practices are routine behaviours that are expressed and analysed according to people's body and mental activity, their way of thinking and use of knowledge, understanding and their emotional and motivational state (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2007), i.e. the strategic practices relate to habits, objects or social norms defined as role models, methods, rules and routines. Basically, it is what gives meaning and information to act (for example, conversation at a hotel, data collection interviews, influential contacts - persuasion, incidental cooperation, conversations, etc.) or in other words, the resources used during the activities.

It is important however unravel strategic practice from strategy-as-practice, because if the first emanates from a set of routine behaviours, the second refers to situations, interactions and own interpretations that cause strategic activity.

If strategic practices are structural elements of practice during the process of a strategy that, in turn, creates strategic practices for its activity (Giddens, 1984; Jarzabkowski, 2003;2004; Whittington, 2001;2002) the strategy-as-practice refers to the application and interpretation of these practices.

In this context it is also important mention that practice is not a process. A process refers to "how and why" of the involvement of things over time, which in its relationship with the strategic component refers to the concern as how the organizational strategies are formulated and implemented (Van de Ven, 1992). Practice in turn, and as suggested by Jarzabkowski and Wilson (2002) is an extension of the process, or, as suggested by Hutzschenreuter and Kleindienst (2006) is one of six main strategy in the construction of strategic process.

From this dichotomy, and as suggested by Whittington (2007) if practice is conceptualized as the three elements that establish the research field of the strategy-as-practice structure, process is continuity, leading to conclude logically that strategy-as-practice is not content, is not change and probably not substance, that is rather a process.

In another context, "practitioners" are individuals who define and implement strategies (Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009) in, and with, organizations, bringing them new and special management tools, new interests, ambitions and resources for their strategic work. They are seen as the organization's actors, whether they are managers or not and whether they are internal or external members of these organizations (Lundgren and Blom, 2009; Whittington, 2007).

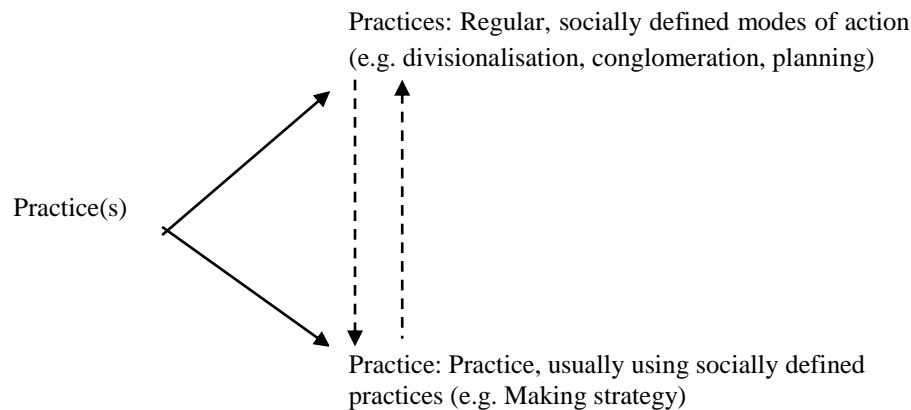
According Whittington (2007), Lundgren and Blom (2009), it was because of this definition that resulted in the first topic of interest of the strategy-as-practice, the "strategic profession", whose focus is the institutional part, being implied the research area of strategy-as-practice.

Finally, the strategic "praxis" are the various activities involved in the formulation and implementation of corporate strategy Whittington (2006) and can be described as the activity in which the strategy is carried out

(Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2007) such as decisions, meetings "workshops", change of strategic processes, stock patterns change, among others, i.e. the activities that constitute the strategic work.

The complexity and ambiguity of these concepts, as well as its duality in terms of action and structure can be seen in Figure 2.

Figure-2: Strategy-as-practice - Interaction practices and praxis



Source: Whittington (2001)

In this perspective, the emphasis in terms of "practices" is placed on when the practice takes place (space and time), on how to think during these contributions to the strategic direction of the company as well, on how to act organizationally (Jarzabkowski, 2003;2004; Whittington, 2001;2002), referring, as stated earlier, to the perspective of the strategy-as-practice for the application and interpretation of these practices.

To better understand the paradox between practice and strategy-as-practice, it is necessary that there is a distinction between macro and micro perspectives. The macro phenomena are related to concepts, tools and structuring of elements that reflect the society, i.e., the business environment, by decision of profitability (Whittington, 2001; Whittington *et al.*, 2004). The micro phenomena, on the other hand, are social interactions. Occur interpersonally and can be seen as the life of a strategic process in the manager's point of view. (Jarzabkowski, 2003) (Whittington, 2001; Whittington *et al.*, 2004; Wilson and Jarzabkowski, 2004). Strategy-as-practice results thus simultaneously observing the "What" is done and "How" it is done, being the priority discovering situations that result in strategic activity, the so-called "micro activities that convert strategy into strategy in practice" (Johnson *et al.*, 2003).

The argument is, given this new context, gaining a competitive advantage may depend not only on the environment or resources and business capabilities, but also, and crucially, on the routine tasks of formulating and implementing the strategy at a micro level.

The return to the micro level of analysis, although not being a new theme in the social sciences (Brown and Duguid, 2001), brings a new scope in the strategy study, implying of course the search field of strategy-as-practice has set a new direction in strategic thinking, primarily for managers in the way they act and interact in "how to strategize", but also for teachers, researchers, and "strategy practitioners" such as consultants, implying an analysis that goes beyond the handling of large statistical databases and/or simple conceptual readings of already conceptualized approaches (Whittington, 1996).

### 3. The Strategy-as-Practice in the Management Consulting Services and Industry

Despite the strategic consulting being a dominant sub-branch in management consulting (Poufelt *et al.*, 2005) and the growing interest in strategic consulting and its strategic influence in companies, there is a very limited number of studies investigating the contributions of the consultants in the strategic process (Bloomfield and Danieli, 1995; Clark, 2004; Fincham and Clark, 2002a; Fullerton and West, 1996; Kirby and Jones-Evans, 1997; Knights and Morgan, 1991; Lundberg, 1997; Powell, 1997; Salaman, 2002; Werr and Styhre, 2002) and its contribution to the creation, dissemination and use of knowledge management at a macro and micro level.

If we take into account aspects of the process while the ratio of content of human activity, as provided by the analysis of the strategy-as-practice and based on the analysis of the effective work of the consultants, this shortage is even more evident (Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009; Kaiser and Kampe, 2005; Lundgren and Blom, 2009), which is also emphasized by the need for strategy to be analysed starting with the gathering of social practices, produced, practiced and used by so-called extra-organizational strategic experts.

The focus of the study of strategy-as-practice in actors outside of the organization such as consultants (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2007; Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009; Whittington, 2006) and their complex interactions as strategy practitioners due to their status in the organizational regarding their client-companies (Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009), will contribute concretely to the development of this field of research, this status categorized by a relationship (client-partner) that may eventually evolve into more informal relationships over time (Lundgren and

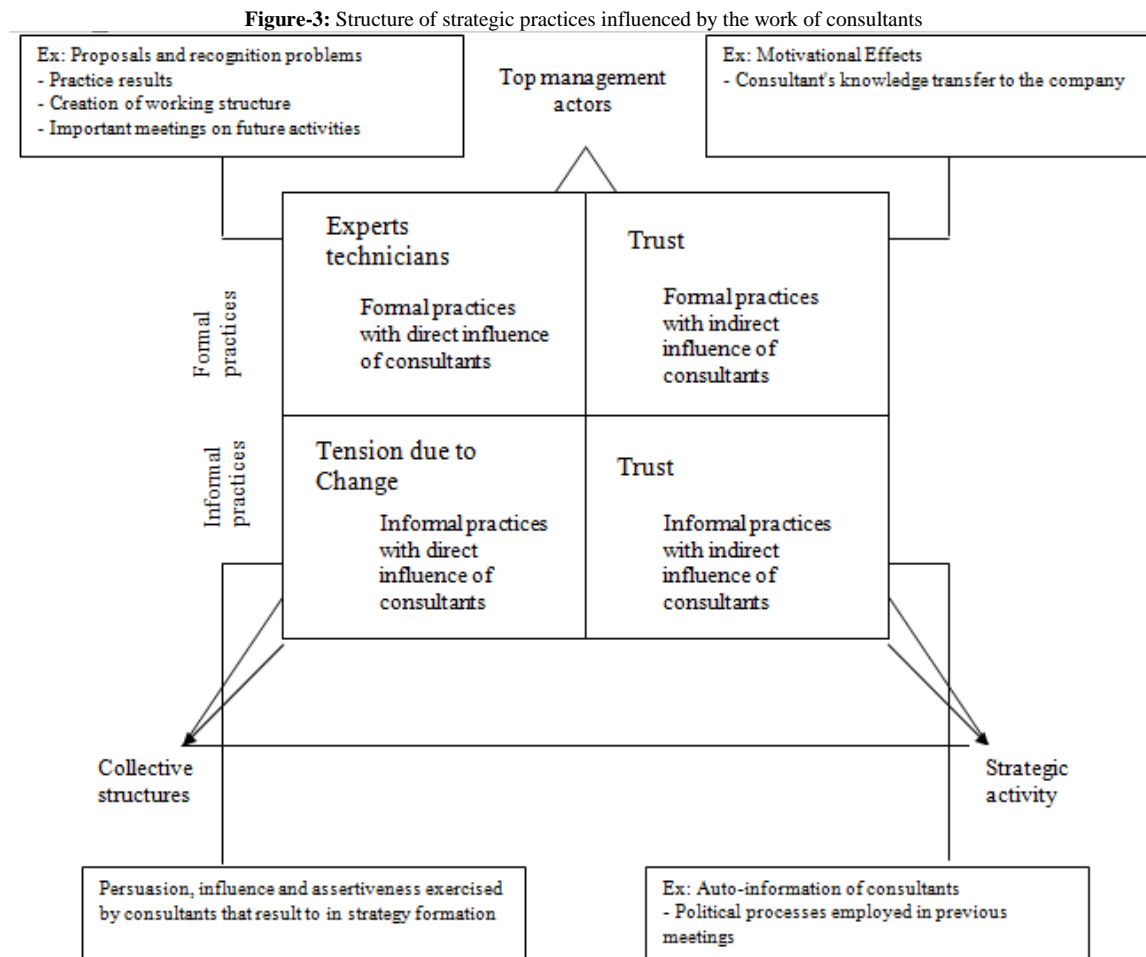
Blom, 2009), and for this reason Jarzabkowski *et al.* (2007) call the "practitioners", the "praxis" and "practices" as essential factors of what is called "making strategy."

Thus, to carry out research on the influence of strategy consultants, it is not sufficient to describe their presence during the various stages of the strategic process, it is also not sufficient to explain their contributions to the content of strategy. A more global perspective is needed to capture the influence in the genesis of the strategy, i.e. taking into account the importance of these actors as co-producers of management and the contribution they bring to the corporate strategy (Clark, 2004).

By analysing the influence of consultants in a practical perspective goes far beyond this type of research because it means to investigate which practices affect the strategy and determine the influence of consultants on these practices, meaning that it is important to disentangle formal and informal strategic practices and the influence of consultants on these practices.

Regarding the influence of consultants on practices that affect the strategy, they can also be direct or indirect. A direct influence may result from the definition of a problem at a meeting, i.e. a practice can only be directly influenced by the consultant's presence. Still, it should be noted the importance of indirect influences (e.g., the use of consultants database used by project leaders) in the strategic process. Although such influences are not as focused or visible, such practices cannot be neglected in the achievement of success, although they need active intervention of the actors.

The differentiation between formal and informal practices can be seen in Figure 3, which structure was based on the investigative framework of formal and informal practices, and direct and indirect influences of Kaiser and Kampe (2005), and the introduction of some notes presented later by the author, which established a framework of strategic practices to consider in the development of the work done by the consultants in the management consulting industry.



Source: Adapted from Kaiser and Kampe (2005)

Mentioning all theoretical addressed proposals to the field and/or empirical study in management consulting literature, certain questions remain open, such as can management consultants be considered as the true strategy practitioners?

Thus, the purpose of this study is not characterized in terms of testing any model during construction of the above theoretical construct, and instead to test a set of prepositions which are open from the results of Jarzabkowski and Whittington when studies and that picture the consultants as experts and the consulting activity as a knowledge-intensive activity.

The research model of this study seeks to answer four basic questions: what are the determinants that make up the management consulting industry in Portugal? Is the management consulting activity a knowledge-intensive activity? What is the role of learning in the work performed by the consultants? Can the consultants be considered experts and practitioners of the strategy?

#### **4. Methodology**

In terms of verification and demonstration of what is stated in terms of research, as to the purposes that support this research, it had implied a practical character and exploratory aspect. In the first case, the practical character resulted from attempting to investigate a contemporary phenomenon in real life context (Yin, 1994), assisted with the presentation of an exploratory side given the absence of a large systematized knowledge about the complex social management consulting phenomenon and the contribution that it brings to the development of the business strategy of SMEs in Portugal. Also having the purpose of categorizing concepts and generate new ideas and theoretical knowledge on the subject, with the intention of gaining new "inputs" on the contribution of consultants to business strategy, these answers are only possible to find by searching for causes of certain outcomes (internal validity).

It should be noted in this context that the application of surveys in this study were not based on any pre-test with the questionnaires and interviews designed from the issues previously portrayed in terms of implementing its own research model designed for this purpose, particularly around the questions: Which determinants make up the management consulting industry in Portugal? Is the management consulting activity a knowledge-intensive activity? What is the role of learning in the work performed by the consultants? Can the consultants be considered experts and practitioners of the strategy?

Regarding the means, this research was based on a pragmatic or inductive character, and was conducted from a non-probabilistic convenience sample, made according to the availability and accessibility of covered elements (Carmo and Ferreira, 1998) in this case management consultants and senior managers of Portuguese SMEs.

In quantitative terms there were sent 300 questionnaires to SMEs and 350 to management consultants (including 50 independent consultants) by email, every two weeks were sent "reminders" so that they answer the questionnaires. A total of 37 questionnaires were answered by managers of SMEs and 29 management consultants, totalling 66 questionnaires with a response rate of 10.15%. It should also be noted that the sample of consultants consisting initially represented (compared to the 350 questionnaires sent) about 0.5% of the survey sample, and for SMEs that percentage was about 0.12%. There was a pre-test done on the covered questionnaires.

The qualitative method of analysis was also done conducting 17 interviews with 9 senior management consultants and 8 managers of SMEs in Portugal, and the sample in terms of interviews had an intentional character (the participants who were selected that best represented the investigated phenomenon in terms of knowledge).

In terms of qualitative analysis technique used to interpret the reproduced data from the interviews was transferred into a content analysis, trying to relate the semantic structures (signifier) to the sociological structures (meanings) of statements in order to articulate the surface of texts with the factors that determine their characteristics (psychosocial variables, cultural context, and the context, processes and listening to the message) - Figure 4. Consequently, from the recordings, later documented in written texts, the explanation process, organization and expression of message content, promoted by content analysis was organized into three different chronological poles, i.e., initially performing the organization and systematization of ideas, secondly explore all the material, and finally treat and make the respective interpretations of the results.

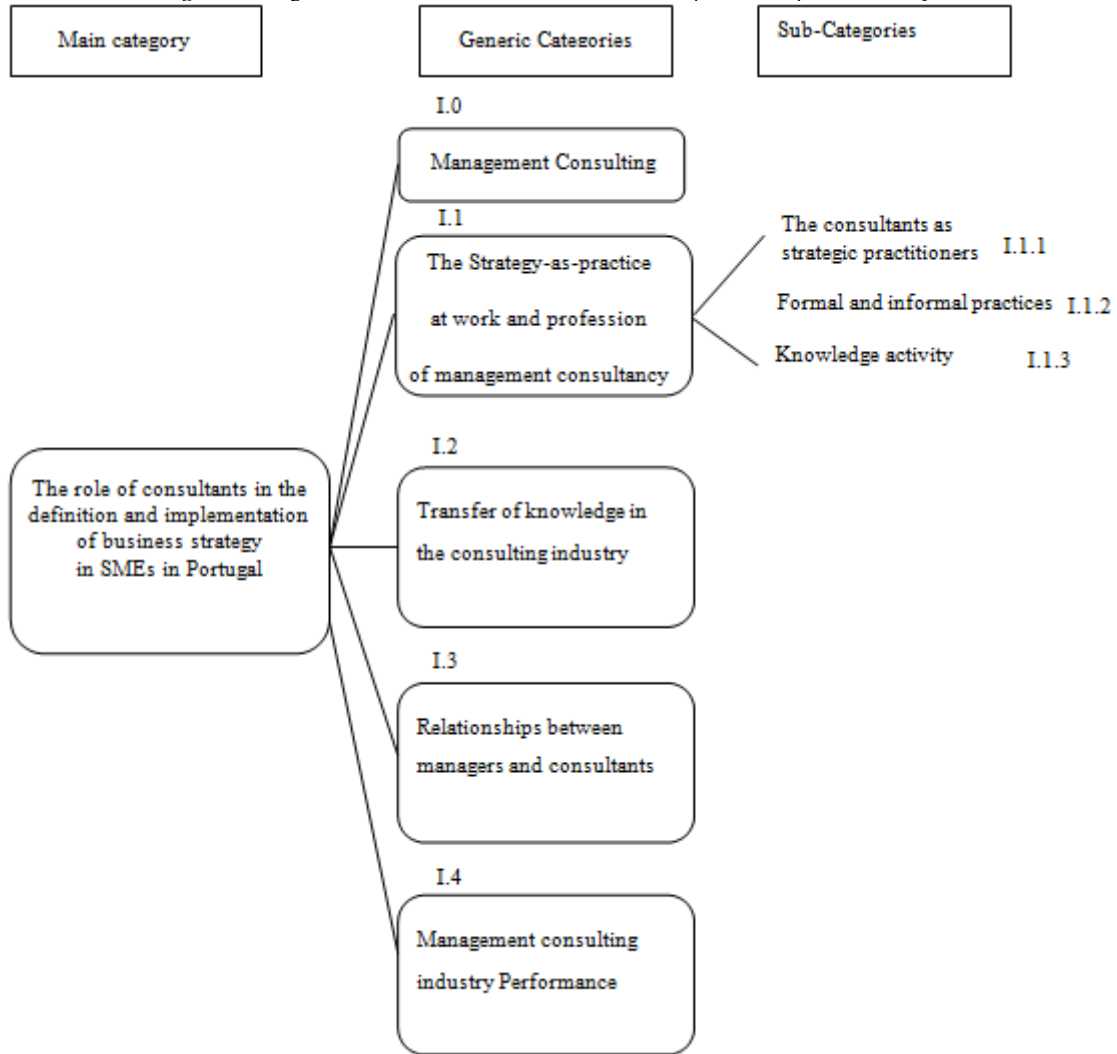
It should also be noted that the semi-structured interview technique was used on the basis of more or less structured questions, although implicit in adaptive and non-rigid character, almost always leaving the conversation to flow. That is, despite having the questions previously prepared, most of them were generated as the interview took place, allowing us to and interviewed the flexibility to deepen or confirm certain data when necessary. In other words, this was a planned interview but of spontaneous character, allowing us to collect many important data generating qualitative information.

So these were more spontaneous and informal interviews, although directed by a list of interest points from a pre-structured script. So whenever the respondent addressed the identified subjects the interview would flow at will, being recorded and later transcribed all relevant data in order to be treated by the above-mentioned content analysis.

The questionnaires was based predominantly on Likert scales with open and closed questions to 29 consultants and 37 managers of SMEs in Lisbon, Douro, Leiria, Setúbal, Madeira, Minho, Beira Alta and Algarve (Portugal). The representative sample of respondents is predominantly men (63%), whose ages have an arithmetic average of 37. Nearly all respondents have a higher level of academic education and are working in their current companies on average of about 8 years. Also note that the sample at the level of SMEs is fundamentally linked to several retail companies and consulting firms in various sectors of activity that composes the area of business management.

It should be noted that although secondary sources have been used and other analyses have been developed to supplement the results, this factor cannot justify the presented results as necessarily generalizable in terms of consulting practice.

Figure-4. Categorization and codification the interview's "corpus" of for qualitative analysis



Source: Elaborated by the Authors

## 5. Research Results

It should be noted immediately, as verified in this investigation, in Portugal there are two types of management consulting, a catalyst consulting for fast decision making and more specific analysis of the human and financial resources of the companies, a logic of diagnosis and counselling rather than implementation (strategic and operational consulting) and other, more technical and regarding detail and in this case more logical, assuming the inclusion of the implementation phase of the recommended changes (by consulting processes).

Regardless of this paradox in explanatory terms, the truth is that in both cases it was clear that knowledge management was widely recognized as one of the most competitive resources that companies can hold in terms of global dynamics of today's business environments (Sharif *et al.*, 2005). Connected to different interpretive dynamic, allowing, when understood and applied, (Brooking, 1999) starting with the variables - experience, values, contextual information (Davenport and Prusak, 2000) - increase the distinct capacity of individuals in action (Ayer, 1956), being therefore more explicit (e.g. result of the presentation of a research report), tacit (resulting from discussions, personal stories and interactions related to personal perspectives, intuition, emotions, beliefs, experiences and values) and/or, implied or systematic, depending on the considered contextual framework, which can be individual, in groups or the organization (Davenport and Prusak, 2000; Dixon, 2002; Inkpen, 1996; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995).

So the first sub-question which arose was trying to immediately realize if we can consider management consulting as a resource of distribution and knowledge transfer and new organizational practices for client organizations as claimed by Bechina and Bommen (2006). In fact it seems this research undoubtedly concludes is that management consulting is based on a structure of expertise, and may even be considered as a knowledge-intensive activity, following what happens in sectors or areas such as accounting, medicine or law, hence defending the theories of Dawes *et al.* (1992), (Alvesson, 1993;1995) and Engwall and Kipping (2002) and opposing to the understanding of Perkin (2002), Grob and Kieser (2006) when mention that the management consultancy sector

cannot dominate a structure of knowledge, nor be compared to classic sectors such as those mentioned above in terms of knowledge production.

From this analysis it can be concluded as held by [Fincham et al. \(2008\)](#), that credibility and knowledge are the two important pillars in the management consulting process, distinguishing an expert in customer perspective, though these can sometimes be transcribed in a more ambiguous and/or transcendent way. Indeed, there is a fine line between what the client needs and what the consultant thinks that makes sense to the customer. In strategic consulting is where you may notice more this type of game, leading the consultant to propose what the customer wants rather than what might be best for the business. This is the typical game of strategic consulting; happening mostly at a subconscious level, eventually affecting the purpose of management consulting. It is also because of this statement that the valuation given by consultants and managers when asked about the importance of the nature of relationships in a process of this kind, and the first impressions and relationships may be crucial for the development of a successful process.

In this same area of analysis and, according to [Fincham \(1999\)](#); ([Fincham et al., 2008](#)), the importance of lifelong learning is enhanced on the part of consultants in various processes which are involved along with teamwork and with different kinds of clients and projects, considering the same learning as the key factor of development of knowledge in the management consulting industry ([Fosstenlokken et al., 2003](#)).

The learning attached to sensitivity gains, history, acquisition of knowledge along the circuit, experience, building standards and growth with past mistakes, can be called pollination effect, as in the wild occurs the photosynthesis of plants and insects, this leads knowledge and learning can be transferred between different organizations from different sectors, allowing an unquestionable improvement.

But if knowledge and learning are taken as the basis of management consulting, can the professionals of this area be called experts? In this investigation, although the consultants call themselves real experts, as mentioned by [Kaiser and Kampe \(2005\)](#), [Lundgren and Blom \(2009\)](#), [Jarzabkowski and Spee \(2009\)](#), in fact the reports collected, the managers do not assure that, because, according to them, they would have to have a deep understanding of customer activity, which does not happen. So they are entitled by the managers as generalized specialists because even though they have knowledge of the market, or the practices of various sectors, this alone does not entitle anyone as expert. To illustrate this we may summarize this situation into a sentence mentioned by one of the interviewed managers, "the consultants never say no to anything," making it clear in the interviews of most managers, there are situations that clearly are not feasible or possible to accomplish, particularly when we are talking about a kind of procedural consultancy linked to the development of projects that involve processes of information technology.

In short, if knowledge is the basis of consultancy, if learning is seen as the key factor in the development of that same knowledge and, some consultants call themselves experts, though they are seen by managers as generalized experts since they do not have a deep knowledge of the business that can entitle them as experts, so the consultants can be called strategic practitioners as stated by [Jarzabkowski \(2005\)](#), [Jarzabkowski et al. \(2007\)](#), and [Jarzabkowski and Spee \(2009\)](#) and [Whittington \(2006\)](#). Can we then say that consultants are individuals who define and implement strategies ([Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009](#)) in/and with organizations, bringing them new and special management tools, new interests, ambitions and resources for its strategic work?

Although the vast majority of management consultants entitle themselves strategy *practitioners*, the fact is they cannot be seen this way, because of the responsibility towards the definition on the one hand and responsibility towards the implementation on the other - [Figure 5](#).

## 6. Final Considerations

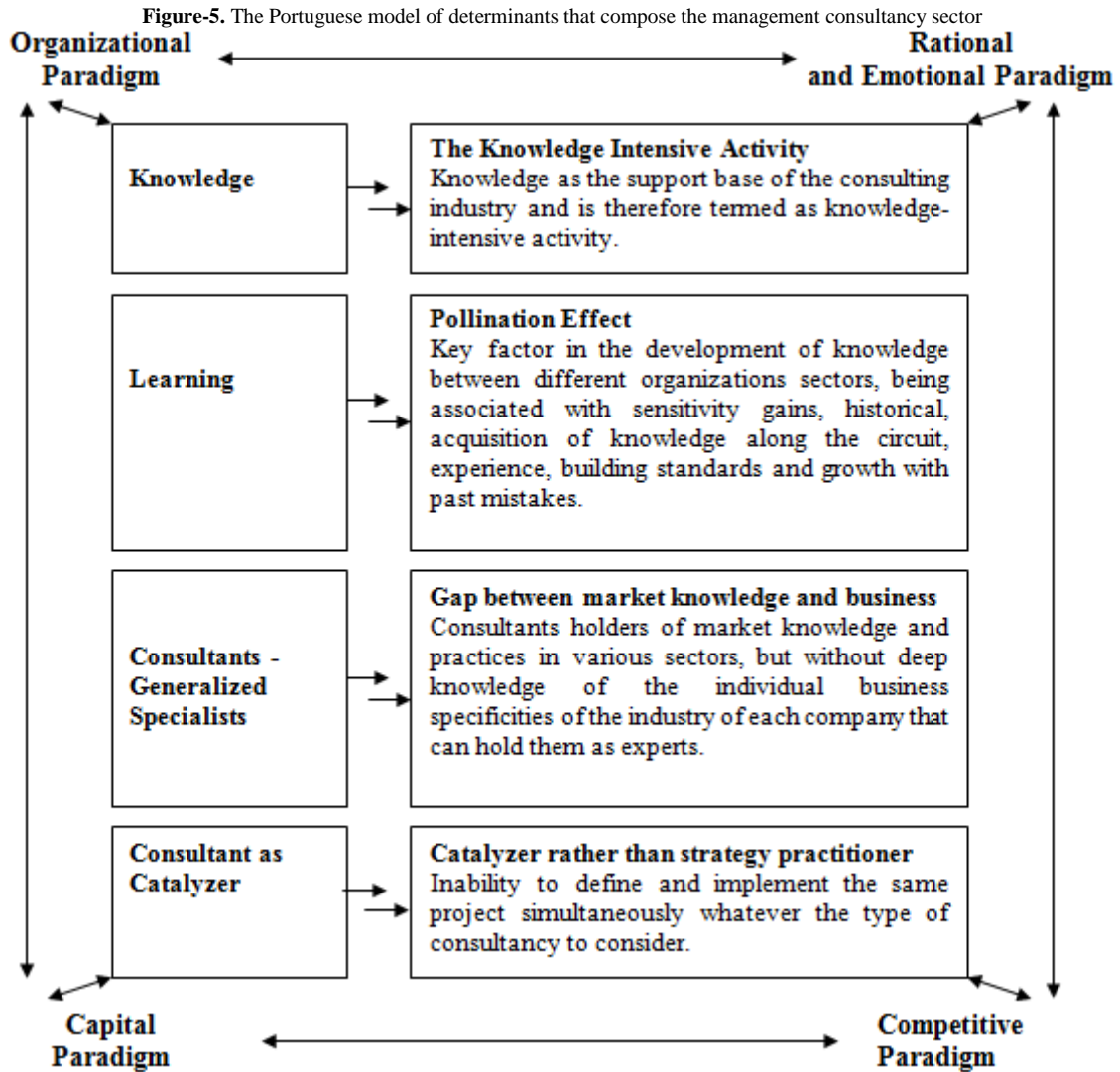
So, to properly analyse the expression "strategic practitioner" two distinct aspects must be taken into account, the ability to set and simultaneously the ability to implement, which in either of the above consulting situations (strategic consulting, operational and processes) this premise occurs.

Considering the role of the operational or strategy consultant, what is enhanced is that there is actually learning ability but, in fact, the models in which the consultants work do not have operational capacity. Allied to this, if we have in mind the lack of expertise as a result of the absence of understanding the business, it is understandable their inability to implement the recommendations.

Additionally, as noted, there is a "gap" between what is expected in the studies versus what actually takes place. It is the eternal question of "moving from the strategy to practice". Most of the time what managers perceive in management consulting projects, is that there are well-designed and thought models, but then, due to the lack of an absolute alignment with the company's strategy, they cannot reproduce efficiently inside the organization so that internally everything is able to run properly.

Taking the example of a more operative project rather than a strategic one, in an optimization within a chain of stores, although in most cases there are mathematically perfect reports and a mostly focused on profitability, these are difficult to implement, and in the case of dismissing workers there are no studies about it, e.g. a study of social context (social costs) or even motivational impacts, which makes these projects impracticable and far from reality.





Source: Elaborated by the Authors

In this sense, with reference to a kind of more strategic and operational consulting, the consultant cannot be considered as a strategy practitioner, taking at most the role of catalyser able to work with tools and means, given experience and knowledge to support companies in the implementation of the proposed actions.

Analysing consulting in a procedural perspective or by task, the logic is the same, although in this case it has to be looked at in reverse. That is, although the consultancy in processes assume an implementation of logic, it cannot be taken in a definition line because although the consultancy in processes can be linked to the company's strategy, these are very unfold action that do not include a completely defining aspect, and the setting or the effective planning will always have to rely on the essential customer support in order to be able to achieve a deep understanding of the business.

Taking as an example the introduction of a computer system in a central purchasing, in this case the function of the consultant is to realize through existing information what is the best way to meet the company's needs so that it can achieve the previously outlined strategy goals. The consultant is therefore the implementer, as though participate in the definition, this is essentially in charge of who defines in internal terms, the strategy. Bridging with the title of an expert consultant, again this factor refers to a general level, because although this may hold knowledge in terms of SAP, CRM, Oracle Finances or any other technological method, these are always seen in a "standard" point of view, being indispensable a team work with the internal management of the company that will allow them to understand the information they have and what is wanted concerning the specificities often complex of a particular business.

Specifically, although management consultants can bring to the business environment new management tools, new interests, ambitions and resources for strategic work, whatever the management consulting we are examining, these can in no way be called strategic practitioners, as designated by Jarzabkowski (2005), Jarzabkowski *et al.* (2007), Jarzabkowski and Spee (2009) and Whittington (2006).

The management consulting industry as knowledge activity and key development factor of that same knowledge among the various sectors and organizations, the management consultants as generalized experts and catalysers

rather than strategy practitioners enable the study under the research field strategy-as-practice a new direction in strategic thinking, actually showing that the strategic activity of consultants does have an important role in the infrastructure of strategy (Jarzabkowski, 2003) through a set of management actions (mediated through strategic practices) that shape this strategy, such as communication, control, development and management of human resources (Aaltonen, 2003; Johnson *et al.*, 2003), although, management consultants cannot be called strategy practitioners as entitled by Whittington (2006), Jarzabkowski *et al.* (2007) and Jarzabkowski and Spee (2009).

Management consulting is therefore a means of distributing knowledge and new organizational practices (Bechina and Bommen, 2006) referring the sharing of produced knowledge to a reciprocal process that creates and distributes learning capabilities within and between organizations (Willem and Scarbrough, 2002) and it may result from this complex merger true construction of legitimacy that may be claimed by management consultants for consideration as active agents of creating fashions and knowledge management (Ernst and Kieser, 2002).

To conclude, we must obviously take into account the findings presented in this study, the result of an investigation with limitations in terms of reduced sample size (respondents), and the results of a particular context (SME), in a particular country (Portugal). However, it was interesting to note that customers have a very encouraging view about management consulting and the work that is being carried out by its professionals, nevertheless they do not forget to recommend changes that can effectively improve the performance, in ensuring that they can always provide even better results to obtain a higher degree of satisfaction, because as mentioned, it is exactly with this assumption that consultancy is hired.

In this sense, in terms of external validity, i.e. the ability to generalize the findings to other contexts or samples, although this study has strengthened some of the existing theory regarding institutional conditions of practical consultancy and management expertise in the area of management consulting, this is only an exploratory study that cannot be generalized or representative.

Finally, another limitation was related to the failure to observe "in loco" client-consultant interactions and therefore the consequent particularities of problems, ideas and techniques that could result from this interaction.

Thus, although this article aims primarily to reduce the lack of studies about the management consulting industry and is limited to the attempt to explore the consultants as strategy practitioners, we must continue to enter this market and realize this motion, bringing to the academic subject a considerable amount of information that brings originality and above all contributes concretely to the development of this field of research.

It is important however to continue to give a new direction to strategic thinking, and some of the ways to contribute to the development of this paradigm can be by examining what happens in organizations when the consultants leave, looking whether the work (practices) is rejected, rebuilt and/or defined and; the comparison between the different areas of management consulting and/or countries for institutional conditions of practical consultancy and knowledge management.

In short, it is important to extend these studies to a deeper basis in regard to all of these subjects, so that in the future the nature of these practices is explored, activities, the steps and relationships in the management consulting sector, and future research be able to include the construction of a model that permits to link all of these variables, so that it can identify which are crucial to achieve success in a management consulting project. The continuous task of studying this sector should also not forget the impact that all this may have in a lower chain, namely at the level of companies client satisfaction as to the work done by the consultants and what suggestions are given to improve performances.

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