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Management consulting effectiveness: Contribution of the working alliance and the consultant's attachment orientation

Abstract

Despite growing interests in understanding the effectiveness of consulting in organizational settings, the contribution of individual and interpersonal factors suggested in the literature has yet to be determined. This article examines the relationship between the client-consultant working alliance, the consultant's attachment orientation and consulting effectiveness from the consultant's viewpoint. Self-report questionnaires were administered to 193 internal and external consultants in Canada. The hierarchical regression analyses suggested that the professional agreement dimension of the working alliance was the strongest predictor of consulting effectiveness as perceived by consultants, in terms of both process and outcomes. Additionally, the consultant's attachment orientation, whether anxious or avoidant, moderated the associations between the working alliance and consulting effectiveness. These findings shed new light on factors contributing to consulting effectiveness from the consultant's perspective and pave the way for innovative avenues in consultants' training and professional practice development.

Keywords

Management consulting, consulting effectiveness, working alliance, attachment, consultant

Public significance statement

The present study suggests that a stronger professional agreement (i.e., agreement on goal, tasks, roles and responsibilities) between the consultant and the client leads to enhanced consulting processes and outcomes. Additionally, it provides new evidence suggesting the contribution of the consultant's attachment orientation to the association between the client-consultant relationship and consulting effectiveness.

After over a decade of steady growth, management consulting revenues decreased by 6.5% in 2020 in comparison to the 2019 figures amidst the COVID-19 pandemic (Mieles, 2021). Consultants, who typically face criticism given the uncertain nature of their work (Sahir & Brutus, 2018), are now subject to heightened pressure for quantifiable results in an increasingly remote, competitive and volatile environment. It is therefore crucial to investigate factors that can foster effective consulting engagements in order to ensure the sustainability and relevance of the consulting industry. The literature suggests several predictive factors of consulting effectiveness, including the client's ownership and readiness to change (Appelbaum & Steed, 2005) and the context of the intervention (Roy, 2008). Among these, two have received greater attention in the consulting literature: The client-consultant working alliance (e.g., Ben-Gal & Tzafrir, 2011; Kubr, 2002) and the consultant's individual characteristics (e.g., Appelbaum & Steed, 2005; Banai & Tulimieri, 2013; McLachlin, 1999).

For many, developing a sound working alliance between the client and the consultant is paramount to effective consulting (Block, 2011; Fullerton & West, 1996; Marks, 2013; Ulvila, 2000). While it has been shown that that clients' perception of the working alliance dimensions is related to management consulting effectiveness (Marcotte-Dubuc, 2016), it remains unclear whether this is also true from the consultant's point of view.

If the consultant's knowledge, skills and personality have been investigated as core ingredients for consulting effectiveness (Banai & Tulimieri, 2013; Bronnenmayer et al., 2016), consultants are also invited to gain a greater awareness of their own attachment orientation to better manage the consulting process (De Haan, 2012; Walsh & Whittle, 2014). Building on Bowlby's (1982) premise that threats perceived in social interactions can activate one's attachment system at any time (p. 259), researchers have extended the application of attachment

theory to social and organizational settings (Hazan & Shaver, 1990; Richards & Schat, 2011; Scrima et al., 2015). Although the results of these studies highlighted the contribution of attachment theory to several work-related dynamics, processes, and outcomes (see Paetzold, 2015, for a review), its implication in the context of management consulting is yet to be determined.

The current study examines the contribution of the working alliance and the consultant's attachment orientation to the effectiveness of management consulting, from the consultant's perspective. The empirical examination of these factors has the potential of offering new insights into the theory and practice of management consulting and enhancing the quality of consulting services provided to organizations to the benefit of consultants and clients alike.

Management consulting

Consulting, as practiced among others by organizational psychologists, is defined as a stepped process where the client and the consultant commit to the achievement of a common goal, and take action upon the organization's processes, resources, or structure (Roy, 2008; Schein, 1999). Among the theoretical foundations of management (or business) consulting, Schein's model of *Process Consultation* is acknowledged as a prominent contribution to the field (Cummings & Worley, 2014; Kubr, 2002; McLachlin, 1999). In contrast to the expert and doctor-patient models, *process consultation*, better understood as a philosophical stance, relies on the premise that the client knows more about the problematic situation than the consultant ever will (Schein, 1999). The consultant's overriding aim is then to build a working relationship that enables the client to take ownership of the situation and its resolution (Schein, 1997, 1999). While many recognize Schein's central contribution to the practice (Gill & Whittle, 1993; Lambrechts et al., 2009; Saltzman, 2011), his model has also been criticized for its anecdotal

style, lack of empirical support, and little guidance on how to put the underlying principles into practice (Lalonde & Adler, 2015; Lapalme & Conklin, 2015). In an attempt to provide a data-driven conceptualization of management consulting success, Bronnenmayer et al. (2016) developed a model based on four concepts referring to the process (i.e., compliance with budget and schedule) and outcomes (i.e., degree of target achievement, profitability and expansion and extension). Evidence stemming from recent studies (Lallier Beaudoin et al., 2018; Roy & Savoie, 2012) also supports that the assessment of management consulting should rely on a joint evaluation of processes and outcomes.

The working alliance

Despite receiving considerable attention from scholars (Belkhdja et al., 2012; Lalonde & Gilbert, 2016; Nikolova & Devinney, 2012), the body of evidence on the client-consultant working alliance (or client-consultant relationship) remains fragmented and lacks consensus (Cerruti et al., 2019). Studies tend to be limited by a propensity to rely on exploratory perspectives (e.g., Chelliah, 2010; Mohe & Siedl, 2011) or to adopt restrictive conceptualizations focusing solely on trust (e.g., Nikolova et al., 2015; Solomonson, 2012). Considering current knowledge gaps in the field of management consulting, the clinical framework is used to inform the definition and conceptualization of the working alliance.

In clinical psychology, the working alliance (or therapeutic/helping alliance; Horvath et al., 2011) has been studied in-depth (e.g., Bordin, 1979; Byrd et al., 2010; Horvath et al., 2011), and its relevance has transcended theoretical approaches (Horvath & Luborsky, 1993). The working alliance is generally accepted as an important predictor of therapeutic change and therapy outcome (Lambert & Barley, 2002). According to Bordin (1979), the working alliance is generalizable to all types of relationships that involve a change agent and an individual seeking

change, which includes work-related relationships (North & Jensen, 2018). In organizational settings, Roy (2008) defined the working alliance as a supportive and asymmetrical relational process through which the consultant assists the client in gaining a greater understanding of their emotions, cognitions, and behaviors in order to improve their situation. Accordingly, the working alliance was conceptualized and measured in three overarching dimensions: 1) professional agreement, 2) contributive exchanges, and 3) interpersonal compatibility (Roy et al., 2016). The dimension of 'professional agreement' refers to the level of collaboration, commitment, and accord on goals and tasks. 'Contributive exchanges' are defined in terms of levels of trust, transparency, and openness in the communication process, while 'interpersonal compatibility' refers to the emotional and personal bond (i.e. the 'fit') between the client and the consultant.

Working alliance and management consulting effectiveness

The capacity to build a strong working alliance with a client is deemed as a core component of management consulting effectiveness that facilitates the intervention (e.g., Block, 2011; Lescarbeau et al., 2003; Roy, 2008). However, evidence supporting this association is scarce and tends to be limited to subjective measures of consulting success or client satisfaction (e.g., Ben-Gal & Tzafrir, 2011; Bronnenmayer et al., 2016; Fullerton & West, 1996).

In a study conducted among 46 client-consultant dyads, Ben-Gal and Tzafrir (2011) found that the dyad's perception of trust (as a dimension of the client-consultant relationship) is positively associated with commitment to change, which is in turn associated with perceived organizational change success. Marcotte-Dubuc (2016), using a sample of 88 clients, found strong associations ($r_s =$ from .54 to .86) between dimensions of the working alliance (professional agreement, reciprocity, and interpersonal compatibility) and the efficacy of the consulting process. Also, interpersonal compatibility was associated with positive outcomes

($r = .45$). Although focused on the client's perspective, her findings provided empirical support to the working alliance - management consulting effectiveness association. In the career counseling context, Masdonati et al. (2014) observed that working alliance ratings (tasks dimension), measured with the *Working Alliance Inventory* (WAI; Horvath & Greenberg, 1989), moderated and mediated the growth in consulting effectiveness scores among a sample of 188 clients. Although the utilization of the WAI may be inadequate in consulting settings given its underrepresentation of the client-consultant professional partnership, these results suggest the important role the working alliance is playing in predicting consulting effectiveness.

The conclusions and limitations of these studies encourage further exploration of the associations between the working alliance and management consulting effectiveness from the consultant's perspective, with the use of context-specific measures able to capture the complexity of the working alliance. Moreover, since the establishment of a good working alliance is of critical importance for practitioners and is deeply rooted in an array of knowledge, skills, and personality on the behalf of the consultant (Schein, 1999), the contribution of individual characteristics, such as the consultant's attachment orientation, should be considered.

Attachment theory

First introduced by Bowlby (1982), attachment is defined as an innate system by which individuals actively seek the support of a significant other in times of need. Forged in early interactions, the unconscious and tacit attachment orientation (secure or insecure) tends to remain relatively stable, thus affecting the way one engages in relationships throughout their life (Bowlby, 1973). Since one's attachment system can be activated at any time in social interactions (Bowlby, 1988; Mikulincer et al., 2002), adult attachment is conceptualized by representations of self and others (positive or negative) on two orthogonal axes, namely anxiety

and avoidance (Brennan et al., 1998). Anxious attachment is typical of a negative representation of self, leading to a fear of rejection and approval-seeking behaviors due to a sense of worthlessness. Avoidant attachment is defined by a negative representation of others, perceived as untrustworthy, resulting in an emotional withdrawal from close relationships and a tendency for self-reliance (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Individuals who display negligible amounts of anxiety and avoidance are described as securely attached (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). In the last decades, researchers extended the application of attachment theory to social and organizational settings (Hazan & Shaver, 1990; Richards & Schat, 2011; Ronen & Mikulincer, 2012; Scrima et al., 2015). Findings from literature reviews indicated that attachment is related to organizational behaviors (Harms, 2011), processes (Paetzold, 2015) and outcomes (Yip et al., 2017). Yet, the contribution of attachment to management consulting remains unexplored.

In their seminal work studying attachment and workplace-related attitudes and outcomes, Hazan and Shaver (1990) found that securely attached individuals approached work with a positive mind-set, were more satisfied with work relationships, and reported higher levels of job satisfaction. Conversely, anxious individuals were less satisfied with their job and felt more underestimated by their coworkers. Avoidant individuals reported less satisfaction with their job performance and more conflictual work relationships. Since then, a substantive body of research supported the associations between attachment and work relationships (e.g., Hardy & Barkham, 1994; Scrima et al., 2015) and job-related outcomes (e.g., Neustadt et al., 2011; Ronen & Zuroff, 2017). Attachment security has been found to foster prosocial behaviors (Little et al., 2011), work relationships (Hardy & Barkham, 1994; Simmons et al., 2009) and organizational commitment (Meredith et al., 2011). In contrast, attachment-related insecurities can interfere with adaptive coping mechanisms (Little et al., 2011; Richards & Schat, 2011), disrupt work

relationships (Leiter et al., 2015; Scrima et al., 2015) and lead to lower levels of organizational commitment (Meredith et al., 2011).

Considering that attachment has been shown to have a unique contribution to work-related dynamics and outcomes beyond personality traits (e.g., Neustadt et al., 2011; Popper et al., 2004), and that attachment orientations shape interpersonal interactions whether there is an attachment bond or not (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016), the attachment framework may provide important insights on client-consultant engagements. More specifically, attachment orientation, as a lens through which one views themselves and others, could mitigate perceptions of social relationships and organizational dynamics and outcomes (Leiter et al., 2015; Yip et al., 2017).

Attachment as moderator of the relationship between the working alliance and management consulting effectiveness

Considering that the effectiveness of consulting engagements can be disputable (Sahir & Brutus, 2018), there is a need to identify potential moderators that can mitigate effective interventions. The attachment framework appears to be highly relevant for management consulting studies, with authors suggesting that an implicit underlying need for emotional support is almost always embedded in the client's initial demand (Kakabadse et al., 2006; Lundberg & Young, 2001). To effectively support their clients, consultants are encouraged to be sensitive and empathetic, to facilitate emotional expression and to prioritize the client's needs above their own (Banai & Tulimieri, 2013; Lundberg & Young, 2001). However, individuals presenting attachment-related insecurities have been found to be less empathetic and less capable of adopting someone else's perspective (Cassidy & Shaver, 2016). In particular, avoidant individuals are less comfortable with closeness and disclosure of personal information (Anders & Tucker, 2000; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Not only is attachment seen as the foundation for the

development of social and relationship skills (Manning, 2003), but the capacity to adequately support someone else depends on one's own sense of attachment security (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Consequently, the way that a consultant reacts to their client's needs could be affected by their own attachment orientation, hence the importance of further assessing the contribution of the latter on the consulting practice. While many authors (De Haan, 2012; Drake, 2009; Whittle & Izod, 2014) have invited consultants to consider their attachment orientation, as well as the client's, as a strategy to better navigate difficult situations in consulting relationships, these practical recommendations have yet to be translated into the empirical investigation of the role of attachment orientation in management consulting interventions.

Objectives and hypotheses

The aim of this study is to investigate the contribution of the working alliance and the consultant's attachment to management consulting effectiveness. Albeit popular among practitioners (Block, 2011; Kubr, 2002; Schein, 2016), the assumption that a good working alliance is critical in achieving effective consulting intervention has received limited empirical support to date, with most studies focusing solely on the clients' perspective (e.g., Ben-Gal & Tzafrir, 2011; Simon & Kumar, 2001). Therefore, in this study we focus on the perspective of the consultant considering that they are responsible for establishing the working alliance (Ulvila, 2000) and the influence they have on the evaluation of the consultation's process and success (Cerruti et al., 2019). The following hypothesis is proposed:

H1. From the consultant's viewpoint, the working alliance is positively related to consulting effectiveness.

Given the significance of (1) the client-consultant relationship in management consulting literature (Cerruti et al., 2019), (2) the negative associations between attachment insecurities and

work performance (e.g., Neustadt et al., 2011) and (3) that attachment is recognized as being relationship-specific (Ravitz et al., 2010), the consultant's attachment might interact with the quality of the working alliance in predicting management consulting effectiveness. For instance, anxious individuals, through hyperactivation of the attachment system, tend to long for proximity and validation, while being hypersensitive to signs of rejection (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). In management consulting settings, anxious consultants could overinvest their relationships with their clients, excessively seek reassurance and worry about the reciprocity of the relationship. These insecurities could have a detrimental effect on consulting effectiveness, especially when paired with a poor alliance.

H2. The consultant's anxious attachment moderates the association between the working alliance and consulting effectiveness from the consultant's viewpoint.

For their part, avoidant individuals, using deactivation strategies, tend to deny their needs for proximity, value self-reliance, and avoid interpersonal closeness (Kaitz et al., 2004; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2012). In the consultation setting, it could be argued that consultants presenting avoidant attachment could keep their client at distance and show discomfort with the dyadic nature of the rapport, which could be particularly detrimental to the consulting processes and outcomes.

H3. The consultant's avoidant attachment moderates the association between the working alliance and consulting effectiveness from the consultant's viewpoint.

Method

Participants

Participants were 193 French Canadian management consultants, 104 women (53.9%) and 89 men (46.1%), working as internal consultants (18.7%, $n = 36$), i.e. advisory role on the

payroll of an organization, or as external consultants (81.3%, $n = 157$), i.e. self-employed or affiliated to a consulting firm. The sample size exceeded the recommended size of 77 participants warranted by G*Power software (Faul et al., 2007) for 80% statistical power (three predictors regression, medium effect size, 5% significance level). Aged between 24 and 74 years old ($M = 46.85$, $SD = 11.41$), the majority of the participants (60.2%) reported having more than 10 years of experience as a consultant ($M = 15.05$, $SD = 9.94$). In observance of the inclusion criteria, all participants have been involved as the principal consultant on a specific consulting engagement with a client for a minimum of eight sessions performed over the last five years. Based on an adaptation of Foucher and Leduc's (2008) categorization, Table 1 shows that the majority of the consultants worked on organizational development interventions (53.3 %, $n = 103$).

Instruments

Consulting effectiveness

Consulting effectiveness was assessed by the consultant's version of the *Consulting Effectiveness Questionnaire* (CEQ-CO; Lallier Beaudoin et al., 2018). This 14-item instrument, rated on a 5-point Likert scale, validated among a sample of internal and external consultants, measures two criteria: value-added outcomes (4 items, e.g., *The intervention added value to the organization*) and process quality (10 items, e.g., *The consultant's analysis is relevant.*).

Cronbach's alpha values of the CEQ-CO ($\alpha = .85$) and its criteria ($\alpha_{Outcomes} = .74$; $\alpha_{Process} = .81$) are similar to those reported by Lallier Beaudoin et al. (2018) in their first sample.

Working alliance

The working alliance was assessed with the consultant version of the *Client-Consultant Relationship* (CCR-CO; Roy, Marcotte-Dubuc, & Lallier Beaudoin, 2016). Its three dimensions

(professional agreement, contributive exchanges, and interpersonal compatibility) are measured by 26 items on a 5-point scale. Similar to those reported by Roy et al. (2016), the alpha values of the CCR-CO ($\alpha = .92$) and its dimensions of professional agreement ($\alpha = .84$), contributive exchanges ($\alpha = .77$) and interpersonal compatibility ($\alpha = .83$) are satisfactory.

Attachment

The consultants' attachment orientation is measured by an adaptation of the ECR-12 (Lafontaine et al., 2016), a short version of the *Experiences in Close Relationships* (ECR: Brennan et al., 1998) replacing the terms referring to the romantic partner by "others at work". In the absence of a French-validated and work-specific measure, the robust psychometrics properties of the ECR, when stripped of its references to romantic partners, makes it a valuable alternative for studies in organizational settings (Richards & Schat, 2011; Yip et al., 2017). The ECR-12, validated in French across multiple samples (Lafontaine et al., 2016), measures dimensions of attachment-related insecurity, namely avoidance, and anxiety, on two six-item scales. The alpha values ($\alpha_{\text{avoidance}} = .71$; $\alpha_{\text{anxiety}} = .82$) are similar to those of Lafontaine et al. (2016).

Accompanying the research questionnaires were a sociodemographic questionnaire assessing age, sex, role, and geographical location, and the French version of the *Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale (MCSD Form C)*; Crowne-Marlowe, 1960; Reynolds, 1982). The 13 true or false items of the *MCSD Form C* allow to control for social desirability by describing socially reprovved although frequent behaviors (e.g., *I am sometimes irritated by people who ask favors of me*), as well as behaviors that are socially accepted but rarely practiced consistently (e.g., *No matter who I'm talking to, I'm always a good listener*). Considering the dichotomous nature of the data, the Kuder-Richardson formula 20 was used calculate the alpha

value. It showed a passable internal consistency coefficient of .63 (after the withdrawal of item #3), inferior to the coefficients varying from .74 and .76 reported by Greenberg and Weiss (2012), and Reynolds (1982). Item 3 was removed from all subsequent analyses.

Procedure

Participants were recruited voluntarily through personalized email invitations sent via public business contact information and social networks. Business managers from the public and private sectors were also contacted and encouraged to share the invitation with their internal consultants. The research questionnaires, hosted on the *SurveyMonkey* platform, were completed online ($M = 30$ min.). Before accessing the questionnaires, consultants electronically provided their consent and certified their compliance with the inclusion criteria. Ethics approval had been granted by the researchers' affiliated institution.

Analysis strategies

To test the associations among working alliance dimensions and consulting effectiveness criteria, multiple linear regressions were conducted. Moderator analyses were then conducted to test whether the working alliance plays a moderating role between the consultant's attachment orientation and consulting effectiveness. When testing for the moderating role of anxiety, avoidance was inserted in the analysis as a covariate and vice versa. The analyses' statistical assumptions and results are presented below.

Results

Preliminary analyses

One hundred ninety-three questionnaires ($n = 193$) were admissible out of the 284 questionnaires collected (retention rate: 67.96%). Of the 91 deleted questionnaires, 50 were incomplete, 40 did not meet the inclusion criteria, and one (1) presented an erratic pattern of

response. Based on a negligible missing data percentage (0.39%) and Little's (1988) MCAR test ($p = .265$) supporting the randomness of the missing data, a multiple imputation of the missing values was performed in SPSS. Examination of the distributions showed that only Contributive Exchanges presented skewness and kurtosis values superior to 2 (see Table 2), warranting to estimate confidence intervals around the regression coefficients. Bivariate correlations (see Table 2) supported the absence of multicollinearity with no coefficients larger than .80 among the studied predictors (Field, 2009).

To determine the relevance of controlling for potentially confounding variables, Pearson correlations between studied variables and all sociodemographic variables were computed. Results showed that consultants' age was significantly related to process quality ($r = .316, p < .001$), professional agreement ($r = .288, p = .002$) and contributive exchanges ($r = .169, p = .019$). Also, social desirability was significantly related to process quality ($r = .338, p < .001$), value-added outcomes ($r = .187, p = .009$), professional agreement ($r = .228, p = .001$), and contributive exchanges ($r = .222, p = .002$). Thus, subsequent analyses included age and social desirability as covariates. Age was also positively related to social desirability ($r = .331, p < .001$). Point-biserial correlations showed that gender was not related to any of the studied variables. Harman's single-factor test was run on all items of the CEQ-CO and CCR-CO and revealed that observed variables shared less than 50% of the variance ($EV = 26.815\%$), suggesting the absence of data contamination due to common method bias.

Working alliance and management consulting effectiveness

Three hierarchical multiple linear regressions were conducted to examine associations among the working alliance dimensions and, successively, 1) process quality, 2) value-added outcomes, and 3) overall consulting effectiveness scores. For all tested models, age and social

desirability were introduced in the first step, followed by the three working alliance dimensions in the second step. Homoscedasticity and residual linearity assumptions, as well as the absence of extreme multivariate values, were met.

The regression results are summarized in Table 3. All models were significant at the first step in predicting consulting effectiveness and its criteria, and the introduction of the working alliance dimensions at the second step added from 25.7% to 33.2% of explained variation. When the three working alliance dimensions were considered simultaneously, only the professional agreement significantly explained the consulting effectiveness mean score, as well as each of its criteria, with unique explained variation ranging from 11.8% to 16.9%. Neither the contributive exchanges nor interpersonal compatibility significantly explained consulting effectiveness, beyond professional agreement. Albeit professional agreement stood out as the only predicting factor, these results overall supported Hypothesis 1 suggesting that working alliance is significantly associated with consulting effectiveness as perceived by the consultants.

Moderating role of attachment

Analyses testing the moderating role of the consultant's attachment in the association between the working alliance and consulting effectiveness were performed using Hayes's (2018) PROCESS macro with SPSS 27, allowing for the estimation of confidence intervals among 1000 random samples. Two significant moderation models were found. The first model revealed that the consultant's anxious attachment moderates the association between the contributive exchanges (working alliance dimension) and consulting outcomes ($F(6,186) = 7.549, p < 0.001, R^2 = .196$). There was a direct negative relationship between anxiety and outcomes (see Table 4), however this association was characterized by a significant interaction effect between contributive exchanges and anxiety ($B = 0.236, p = .003, 95\% \text{ CI } [.083; .388]$). The simple slope

analysis (see Figure 1) revealed that, when anxiety was high, contributive exchanges were positively associated with consulting outcomes ($B = 0.629$, $SE = 0.107$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [.418; .841]). When anxiety was low, the association between contributive exchanges and consulting outcomes was not significant ($B = 0.119$, $SE = 0.128$, $p = .352$, 95% CI [-.133; .371]). The Johnson-Neyman technique for region of significance showed that the relationship between exchanges and outcomes became significant as soon as consultants obtained a score of 1.72 on the ECR-12 anxiety scale (slight attachment anxiety). These results partly supported Hypothesis 2 by showing that anxiety affected the association between contributive exchanges and value-added outcomes. While exchanges were not associated with outcomes in the presence of negligible amounts of anxiety (i.e., more secure attachment), these findings showed the importance of the conversational process for consultants who presented moderate to high levels of attachment anxiety.

The model examining the moderator role of avoidance between professional agreement (working alliance dimension) and process quality was also significant ($F(6,186) = 25.007$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .447$). As presented in Table 4, there was a direct negative association between avoidance and process quality, which was marked by a significant interaction effect between avoidance and professional agreement scores ($B = 0.116$, $p = .037$, 95% CI [.007; .226]). Results showed that, as avoidance scores were increasing, the association between professional agreement and process quality was getting stronger (see Figure 2). When avoidance was low, professional agreement was positively and moderately related to process quality ($B = .375$, $SE = .074$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.229; .522]). When avoidance was high, professional agreement was positively and strongly related to process quality ($B = .607$, $SE = .077$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.456; .759]). Lending partial support to Hypothesis 3, these findings showed the importance of

establishing a strong alliance based on mutual professional agreement for avoidant consultants to compensate for the negative effect of their attachment orientation on process quality.

Discussion

This study investigated the relationship between the working alliance and management consulting effectiveness and explored the moderating role of attachment orientation from the perspective of the consultant. Data supported the first hypothesis and, in line with previous assumptions (e.g., Block, 2011; Lescarbeau et al., 2003), showed the central contribution of the working alliance to consulting processes and outcomes. From the consultant's point of view, all dimensions of the working alliance, as well as the working alliance global score, were related to perceptions of consulting effectiveness criteria and global score. However, when considered simultaneously, only the professional agreement dimension significantly predicted consulting effectiveness. As the dimension of the professional agreement refers to the deliberate clarification of the parameters of the relationship (e.g., goals, tasks, collaboration), these results emphasize the pivotal role of the consultation's entry and contracting phases where each party's expectations of objectives, tasks and contributions are discussed and agreed upon (Anderson, 2016; Block, 2011). Our findings mirrored those of Marcotte-Dubuc's (2016) who found that professional agreement had the greatest impact on consulting effectiveness from the perspective of clients. The present study, by providing evidence that suggests the determining role of the working alliance (particularly the professional agreement) with regards to consulting effectiveness, makes a significant and greatly anticipated contribution to the field (Appelbaum & Steed, 2005; Roy, 2008). Also worth noting is that the use of a new multidimensional measure encompassing both professional and relational aspects allowed for a refined understanding of the working alliance.

Of particular interest was the positive relationship between consultants' age and their perceptions of consulting effectiveness (process quality) as well as dimensions of the working alliance (professional agreement and contributive exchanges). Engagements involving long-term client-consultant relationships tend to be allocated to senior consultants (Adams & Zanzi, 2004), thus offering a possible explanation for these results. However, a moderately strong relationship between age and socially desirable responding could suggest the contribution of the *grey hair theory* (Armstrong-Stassen, 1998), described as the tendency in older people to seek positive life experiences, within and outside the workplace. Therefore, a propensity in older consultants to 'look at the bright side of things' may have led to inflated perceptions of consulting process and client-consultant relationship dimensions.

The results lent partial support to the second hypothesis. The relationship between the working alliance (contributive exchanges dimension) and consulting outcomes as perceived by consultants was mitigated by attachment anxiety. For consultants who displayed little anxiety, there was no relationship between contributive exchanges and outcomes. However, as soon as consultants presented moderate attachment anxiety, there was a significant and positive relationship between contributive exchanges and value-added outcomes, marked by the report of enhanced outcomes for anxious consultant who reported higher levels of contributive exchanges. This suggests that contributive exchanges, characterized by openness and transparency in the communication process, may become a more salient factor of consultation efficacy in the presence of attachment anxiety. A recent literature review concluded that anxious individuals tend to display more intrusive, overly accommodating and self-sacrificing behaviors within their interpersonal relationships (Hayden et al., 2017). If the capacity to put the client's needs above their own is highly valued in management consulting (Banai & Tulimieri, 2015; McLachlin,

1999), so is the capacity for the consultant to be transparent and honest, to tactfully confront, and to avoid interfering directly with the client's business (Banai & Tulimieri, 2013; Schein, 1999; Stumpf & Longman, 2000). Therefore, anxious consultants who have the capacity to foster honest and open dialogue with the client could end up with heightened outcomes. Conversely, results revealed that consultants with high attachment-related anxiety who reported poorer exchanges had the lowest outcomes scores. Akin to Hazan and Shaver's observations (1990), it could be argued that anxious consultants, through hyperactivation of their attachment system, when experiencing difficulties maintaining transparent and non-complacent exchanges with their client, could be highly preoccupied with their need for approval and fear of rejection, to the point where their attention is drawn away from expected outcomes.

Similarly, Hypothesis 3 was partly supported by the data. The relationship between professional agreement and process quality was moderated by the consultant's avoidant attachment. Consultants who presented higher avoidance and poorer professional agreement obtained the lowest process quality scores. However, those who reported stronger professional agreement obtained better process quality scores when avoidance was high, therefore emphasizing the importance of fostering optimal professional agreement for avoidant consultants. Using deactivation strategies, avoidant individuals tend to display discomfort with closeness, an inclination for self-reliance and a tendency to withdraw from social interactions (Hayden et al., 2017; Hudson & Fraley, 2017). It is then possible that avoidant consultants approach clients with a distant demeanor, show little interest in interpersonal closeness and prefer working on their own, which can disrupt the client-consultant relationship and consultation process. However, it also seems that highly avoidant consultants who are able to successfully establish a professional agreement (i.e. defining a common goal, sharing roles and

responsibilities and clarifying the nature of the collaboration) can achieve excellent intervention process. A strong professional agreement, although possibly harder to establish in this context, seems to constitute a more significant containing experience and, thus, to have a greater effect on the consulting process. These results stress that cultivating a strong professional agreement is all the more important with regards to consulting process considering relationship impediments inherent to attachment avoidance.

Theoretical and practical contributions

Our findings provide new and compelling evidence supporting the importance of the relational process for consulting effectiveness, a proposal that has been generally accepted (Block, 2011; Marks, 2013) despite scarce empirical evidence. The results suggest the relevance of a multidimensional conceptualization of the working alliance, and thus provide an appropriate response to Lambrecht et al.'s (2009) criticism regarding the lack of appropriate vocabulary to describe the client-consultant relationship.

To our knowledge, this study is also the first to provide preliminary support for the contribution of attachment orientation to management consulting effectiveness through meaningful interactions with the working alliance. By providing new insights into management consulting dynamics, the findings suggest the important role of internal psychological processes such as attachment orientation and encourage further exploration of individual differences in management consulting.

In terms of practical implications, the current study supports practitioners' claims regarding the importance of establishing a productive working alliance for effective consulting services (Kubr, 2002; Roy, 2008). Our findings invite consultants to take a deliberate interest in building the working alliance, managing its tensions and ruptures, and assessing its quality to

better understand and prevent hindered interventions. In doing so, not only do consultants achieve enhanced consulting processes and outcomes to the clients' benefits, but they also contribute to the prosperity of the consulting industry by providing high-quality services to organizations. The data also echoes recommendations (Richter & Schmidt, 2008; Schein, 1999) inviting novice consultants' training to focus on the development of relationship skills that can foster better management of the relational process.

By showing that consultants who display greater attachment insecurities (anxiety or avoidance) can still achieve enhanced consulting processes and outcomes when reporting excellent client-consultant relationships, our results suggested the importance for consultants to gain greater awareness of their own attachment orientation and to develop the skills allowing them to establish and maintain strong working alliances. Moreover, considering that the interaction between attachment anxiety and contributive exchanges can result in poorer consulting outcomes, anxious consultants could foster authentic exchanges by discussing attachment-related issues (e.g., need for proximity and acceptance, fear of rejection) with a trusted peer such as a mentor or a senior consultant. For avoidant consultants, the possible implications of their attachment orientation on the consultation process in the absence of a sound professional agreement include the development of the behavioral skills (e.g., listening, communication, Banai & Tulimieri, 2013; goal clarification, Lescarbeau et al., 2003) needed to successfully establish a professional agreement.

Limitations and directions for future research

Despite valuable conclusions, some conceptual and statistical considerations limit the generalization of the findings and encourage further research. First, the cross-sectional nature of the current study precludes any conclusions regarding causality and temporal stability of the

results. Longitudinal research designs could overcome this limitation by monitoring the evolution of associations during and after the consulting process. Although recommended by Yip et al. (2017), the use of an adapted measure, over a workplace-specific attachment measure, can limit the construct validity of the instrument. Despite the excellent psychometric performances of the ECR-12 (Lafontaine et al., 2016) and a dimensional approach relevant for social sciences (Ravitz et al., 2010), correspondence between the adapted French version of the ECR-12 and a specific workplace measure of attachment should be assessed in future studies.

Data collection from a single source at a single time increases the risks of data contamination from common method bias. Despite statistical procedures suggesting no evidence of measurement error, findings need to be interpreted with caution. Future research could include measures taken from a third party, such as an assessment of the intervention's impacts on the members of the organization to reduce common method variance. The use of self-report questionnaires increases exposure to measurement biases that can affect the validity of the results (Donaldson & Grant-Vallone, 2002). It is possible that consultants, when asked to assess the effectiveness of their own activities, may have been prone to present themselves in a more favorable light, thus resulting in inflated or misestimated scores. Similarly, attachment measures are particularly sensitive to socially desirable responding (Leak & Parsons, 2001). The MCSD was used to overcome this limitation, its alpha value was however passable. In future studies, the recruitment of client-consultant dyads could allow for better control of such bias. This type of recruitment would also allow to compare clients' and consultants' perceptions of both working alliance and consulting effectiveness and to examine actor-partner interdependence models between both parties' attachment orientations, as recommended by Harms (2011).

Finally, considering that this study is one of the first to apply attachment theory to the management consulting framework, future research is encouraged to replicate these findings to gain a refined understanding of attachment-related dynamics in consulting interventions. Replication would also need to consider the ethnic composition of the sample considering that no data regarding the consultants' ethnicity beyond their geographic location was collected as part of the present research. Forthcoming studies could also explore the contribution of other individual variables such as the consultants' personality, knowledge, and skills to provide an integrative model of consulting effectiveness as predicted by the working alliance and the consultant's characteristics.

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Table 1
Type of consulting activities and frequency

Consulting activities	<i>n</i>	%
1. Recruitment and selection <i>(e.g., development of recruitment and selection processes and tools)</i>	23	11.90%
2. Organizational diagnosis and development <i>(e.g., organizational change facilitation)</i>	103	53.30%
3. Training and development <i>(e.g., development and implementation of training programs)</i>	30	15.50%
4. Psychological wellbeing at work <i>(e.g., development of programs to improve employee wellbeing and engagement)</i>	9	4.70%
5. Coaching and career development <i>(e.g., design and implementation of corporate coaching programs)</i>	28	14.60%
TOTAL	193	100.00%

Table 2
Descriptive, and bivariate correlations between main variables

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Skew</i>	<i>Kurtosis</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. CEQ-CO	4.36	0.02	-1.11	1.06	-	.822**	.929**	.417**	.641**	.463**	.353**	-.012	-.091
2. Process quality	4.17	0.02	-1.12	1.38		-	.553**	.521**	.617**	.466**	.371**	-.014	-.068
3. Value-added outcomes	4.56	0.03	-1.28	1.62			-	.418**	.536**	.374**	.276**	-.008	-.089
4. CCR-CO	4.51	0.03	-1.09	0.73				-	.833**	.872**	.916**	-.117	-.015
5. Professional agreement	4.68	0.02	-1.25	0.86					-	.700**	.614**	.016	-.070
6. Contributive exchanges	4.69	0.03	-1.79	3.96						-	.665**	-.116	-.041
7. Interpersonal compatibility	4.15	0.05	-0.90	0.26							-	-.159*	.035
8. Avoidance	3.02	0.07	0.40	0.07								-	.092
9. Anxiety	2.46	0.08	0.86	0.36									-

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.001$

Table 3
Multiple hierarchical regressions between the working alliance and management consulting effectiveness

Variables	Consulting effectiveness (global score)					Process quality					Value-added outcomes				
	β	sr^2	ΔR^2	95% Confidence Interval		β	sr^2	ΔR^2	95% Confidence Interval		β	sr^2	ΔR^2	95% Confidence Interval	
				Lower Bound	Upper Bound				Lower Bound	Upper Bound				Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Step 1			.10					.16					.04		
Age	.16*	.02		.00	.01	.23*	.05		.00	.01	.08				
Social desirability	.23*	.05		.01	.06	.26**	.06		.02	.05	.16*	.02		.00	.06
Step 2			.33					.27					.26		
Professional agreement	.62**	.17		.46	.78	.52**	.12		.31	.61	.57**	.11		.53	1.03
Contributive exchanges	.04					.06					.03				
Interpersonal compatibility	-.07					-.01					-.09				
<i>F</i>			36.35					29.67					22.81		
<i>R</i> ² _{adj}			.42					.42					.28		

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.001$

Table 4
*Moderation models of the relationship between the working alliance and consulting effectiveness
interacting with the consultant's attachment*

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower bound	Upper bound
Moderation 1						
Contributive exchanges	-.195	.217	-.897	.371	-.623	.234
Anxiety	-1.134	.367	-3.093	.002	-1.858	-.411
Exchanges × Anxiety	.236	.077	3.049	.003	.083	.388
Age	.002	.003	.716	.475	-.004	.008
Social desirability	.014	.015	.897	.371	-.016	.044
Avoidance	.018	.032	.541	.589	-.047	.082
Moderation 2						
Professional agreement	.143	.172	.827	.409	-.197	.483
Avoidance	-.566	.264	-2.140	.034	-1.087	-.044
Agreement × Avoidance	.116	.055	2.099	.037	.007	.226
Age	.003	.002	1.867	.064	-.000	.006
Social desirability	.025	.008	3.102	.002	.009	.041
Anxiety	.015	.016	.927	.355	-.016	.046

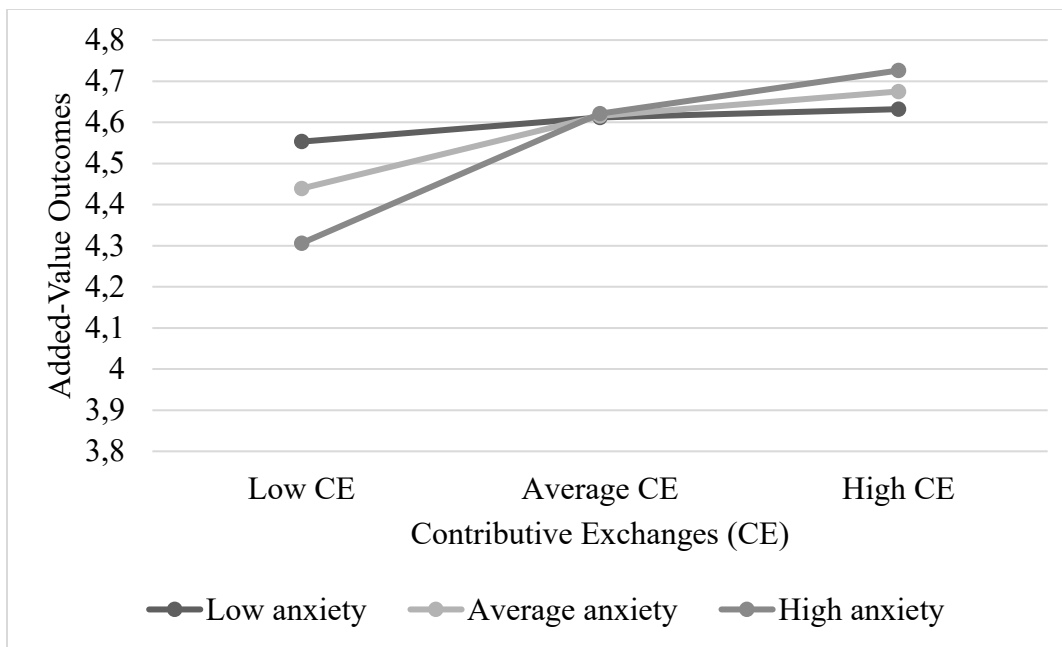


Figure 1. Simple slopes of Anxiety as a moderator between Contributive Exchanges and Value-Added Outcomes.

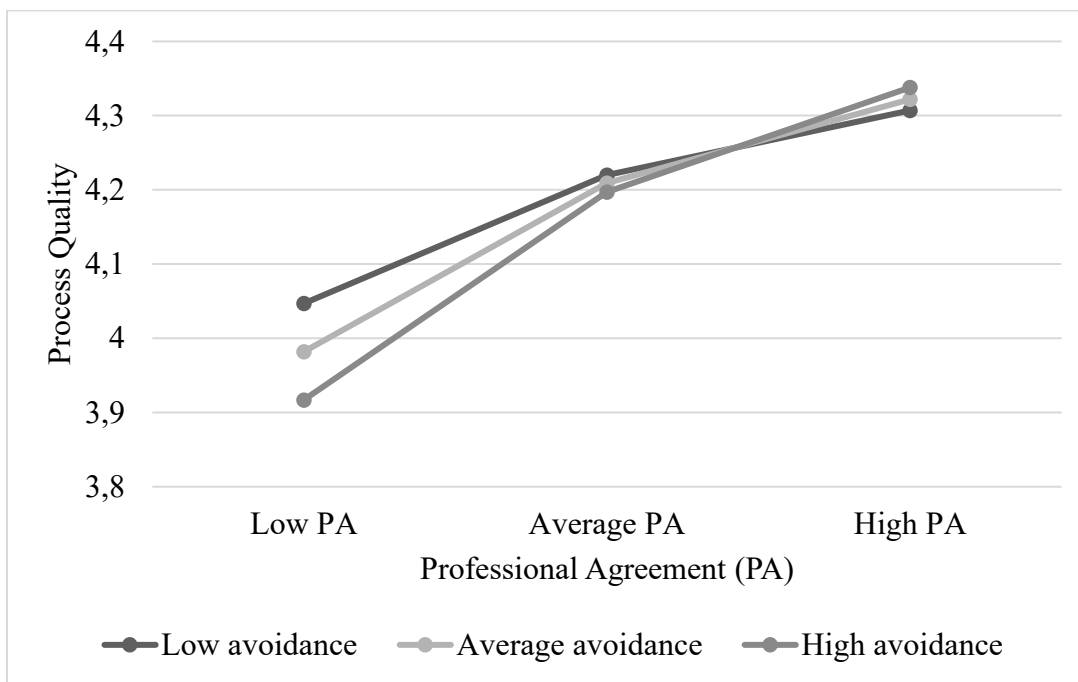


Figure 2. Simple slopes of Avoidance as a moderator between Professional Agreement and Process Quality.